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MANGA MAX

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Satoshi Kon
interview

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EDITOR
Jonathan Clements
DESIGNER
Vanessa Coleman
EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Martin Eden
PRODUCTION CO-ORDINATOR
Ben Gibbons
PRODUCTION CONTROLLER
Bob Kelly
SALES & PUBLISHING ASSISTANT
Rachael Kitts
LA LIAISON
Lou Anders
SALES CONSULTANT
David Orme
MARKETING & PROMOTIONS MANAGER
Katherine Kleeb
GROUP FINANCIAL CONTROLLER
Mike Sleeman
MANAGING EDITOR
John Freeman
ART DIRECTOR
Chris Teather
OPERATIONS DIRECTOR
Leigh Baulch
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
Vivian Cheung
PUBLISHER
Nick Landau

CONTRIBUTORS:
Lee Brimmicombe-Wood, Jeremy Clarke, Peter J. Evans, Andy Hepworth, Melissa Hyland, Iain Lowson, Paul Mason, Helen McCarthy, Jim McLennan, Chrys Mordin, Fred Patten, Stephen Sarrazin, Julia Sertori, Cathy Sterling, Jim Swallow, Motoko Tamamuro, Paul Watson.

Thanks To

Brad Atwell, Stephen Cremin, Edwin De La Cruz, Mark Frodsham, Aki Watanabe, Glenda Runnalls

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SUBSCRIPTIONS Tel. +44 (0) 1858 433169 Sales Consultant David Orme

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This issue is dedicated to the Julia "Butterfingers" Sertori, who told us all how good *Mospiltoh* was, & then dropped the tape on a stone floor.

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Code Of Honour

Cover: Perfect Blue © Takeuchi Rea

At last, after seven long months, the magazine is finally starting to look the way I wanted. There's ten pages of live-action in this issue, all indisputably of interest to the manga-reading public, an exclusive interview with a major player in anime, a look at a manga that hasn't been translated yet, and the low-down on some of the latest anime to hit the UK and US.

With *Princess Mononoke* hitting the US very shortly, *Pocket Monsters* on Sky TV in the UK, and *Perfect Blue* getting some very decent coverage in the mainstream press, it looks like it's going to be a good summer for anime. Who knows, at some point in the not-too-distant future, someone might even announce a UK release date for the Buena Vista Miyazaki films.

Jonathan Clements

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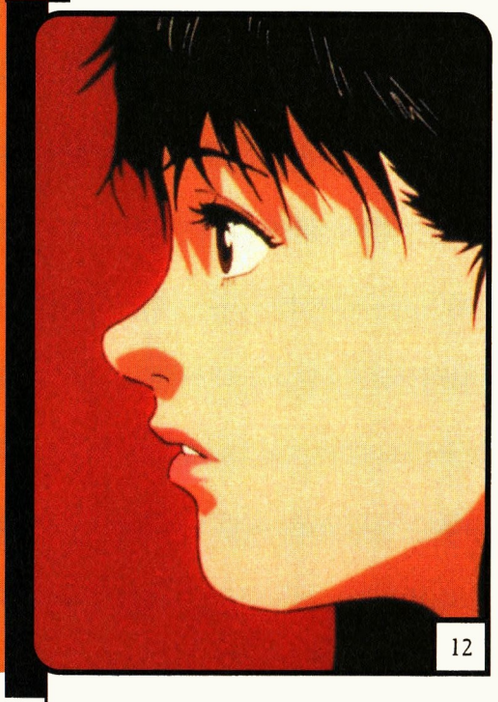

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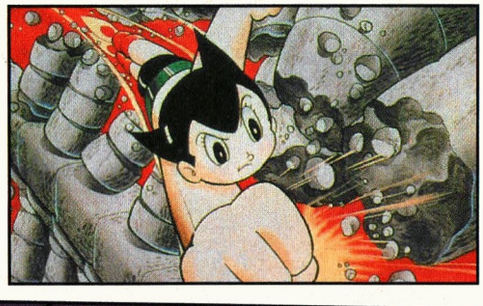
Pathetically off-target musings about what the next issue will look like. But you know it's going to be fab anyway, don't you?

A Muppet Christmas?

Jim Henson Pictures is rumoured to be in final negotiations over the rights to an *Astro Boy* movie, slated for a release in December 2000. As the first anime series to be translated for the US market, Osamu Tezuka's world-famous creation has the advantage of being known to more movers and shakers in the movie business, and a better chance of a green light. According to the *Hollywood Reporter*, producer Don Murphy has been in talks about the project from the moment the *Astro Boy* film rights came back on the market in 1997. News so far indicates a combination of computer graphics, animatronics and live-action, with of course, Jim Henson's Creature Workshop producing Astro Boy himself. ●

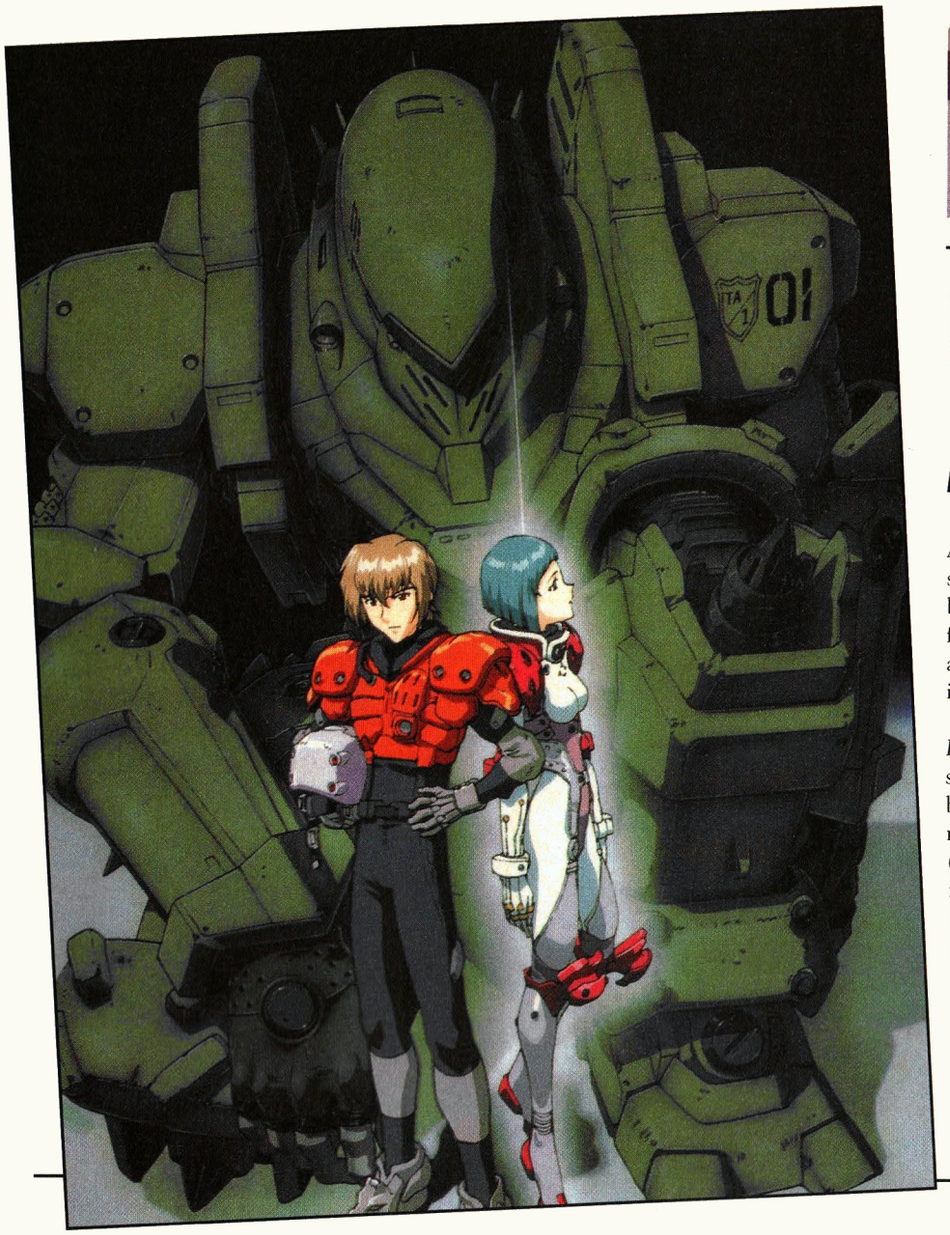


Seabass 123

Hang on to your hats, it's time for *Seabass 123*, and you may start wishing you were somewhere else. Based on the comic currently running in *Comic Gao*, Seabass Scotch is a Chasemancer, and a loud, brash self-centred git to boot. When young sweetie Million Dara tells him there's ten thousand in gold waiting for the person who can tame the god Loki, he's off on the trail, accompanied by his shapeshifting servant Kiss and nurse-out-of-water (and occasional bunny girl) Jin Phase. And, no, we don't understand what that means either, but what do you expect from Satoru Akahori, the *too-much-coffee* man behind such laid-back tales as *Beast Warriors*, *Saber Marionettes* and *Sorcerer Hunters*?

The two-part video series, forthcoming in Japan this August, will be directed by Kazuhiro Ozawa (currently riding high on the success of *Trigun*, and trying not to admit to *Battle Athletes*). Animation is in the hands of *Devil Hunter Yoko*'s Hisashi Abe and two past-time perve-pundits fill out the rest of the team – the script is from *Home Room Affairs*' Hiroyuki Kawasaki, and the music is from Nobuo Ito, last spotted on our radar competing with gasps and grunts on *U-jin Brand*. ●

© Satoru Akahori/Yuki Mirai/Teichiku/Tokyo Genzo sho



Sources this issue

Animage, Lee Brimmicombe-Wood, *Cinefantastique*, *Hollywood Reporter*, Chrys Mordin, *Newtype*, Fred Patten, Julia Sertori, Jim Swallow, Motoko Tamamuro

NOH Surrender

ADV have announced their acquisition of the anime television series *Gasaraki*, slated for a US release later this year. The brainchild of *Armoured Trooper Votoms*' Ryosuke Takahashi, featuring designs from *Patlabor*'s Yutaka Izubuchi, *Gasaraki* also ran as a novel in *Newtype* , which has just been reprinted in its entirety.

Although clearly knocked up as Sunrise's answer to *Evangelion*, *Gasaraki* has enough points to make it worth seeing on its own merits, featuring Takahashi's trademark of believable giant-robot action, a post-*Eva* interest in angst-ridden psionic children and truly weird bursts of theatre (yes, that's what we said). *Gasaraki* features Yoshiro Gowa, fourth son of a thousand-year-old acting dynasty, whose family has always financed its Noh dramatic troupe with profits earned from arms deals and mercenary activities. But in a world of increasingly technological weaponry, the most powerful weapon of all is the human mind, and the Gowa family is about to unleash the most dangerous force ever to confront the human race. Get ready for mind control, psychic bombs, robot action and a lot of deep-voiced men going 'Oooowah! ●

© Sunrise/TV Osaka

SOMETHING Fishii

The second London Pan-Asian Film Festival kicks off with a number of films based on manga. As a taster, 3-10 June sees a Tadanobu Asano retrospective at the ICA, at which Asano himself will be a guest. The leading actor of his generation, Asano has groomed himself as Japan's hippest movie star, acting in the feature debut of every major Japanese director to emerge in the Nineties. The Festival features him starring in Katsuhito Ishii's *Shark Skin Man & Peach Hip Girl* and Joji Matsuoka's *Swimming Upstream*, both based on original manga by Minetaro Mochizuki, Shunji Iwai's *PiCNiC*, and Wong Kar-Wai's snappily-titled *wkw/tk/1996@7'55"hk.net*. Two of Asano's strongest titles will also be distributed the same week – Sogo Ishii's *Labyrinth of Dreams* and Satoshi Isaka's *[Focus]*, an attack on journalistic ethics in a climate of faked news. The festival also features the international premiere of Asano in Teruo Ishii's *Wind-Up Type*, based on Yoshiharu Tsuge's surreal 1972 comic.

And yes, for those who have been paying attention, the cancellation of Tatsuya Ishii's *ACRI: Homo Aquarellius* is the only thing that stops there being films from four unrelated directors called Ishii. Now that's spooky...● ICA Box office: 0171 930 3647

INCOMING MANGA TITLES: JULY

CPM MANGA

Martian Successor Nadesico #2
Kia Asamiya, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95

Dark Angel #3
Kia Asamiya, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95
Asamiya's rather strange fantasy tale continues – great to see this in the West at last

Call Me Princess #3
Tomoko Taniguchi, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95

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Akihiro Ito, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95

Lodoss War: The Lady of Pharis #4
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Lodoss War: The Grey Witch #9
Mizuno & Ochi, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95

CPM MANGA X (ADULT TITLES)

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DARK HORSE

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Oh My Goddess: The Fourth Goddess #3 (of 8)
Kosuke Fujishima, B&W, 32 pg, $2.95/£1.95

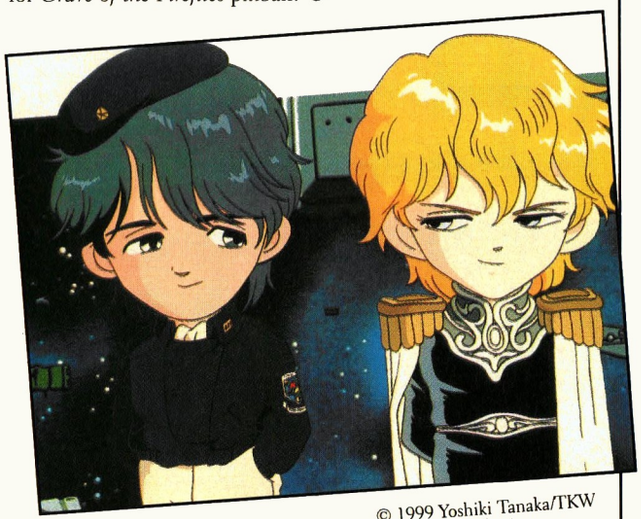
Gunsmith Cats: Bean Bandit #7 (of 9)
Kenichi Sonoda, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95

Shadow Lady: Eyes of a Stranger #3 (of 5)
Masakazu Katsura, B&W, 24pg, $2.50/£1.65

EROS MANGEROTICA
(These titles may not be available in the U.K due to adult content)

GALACTIC ZEROES

No, your eyes are not deceiving you – the interminably long and deadly-serious anime series *Legend of Galactic Heroes* has changed... just a tad. But don't worry, the mean and moody boys in nice uniforms will still be talking themselves to death in the series proper – but for those who fancy a change there is now a special squashed-down PlayStation game based on the series. Luckily, the involvement of the characters is purely cosmetic in *Legend of Galactic Billiards*, *Solitaire*, *Nervous Exhaustion*, *Go Go Casino* and *Let's Backgammon*. Even more fortunately, it's only available in Japanese, so fans of the serious series' po-faced angst won't have their dreams shattered by the sight of their favourite characters duking it out in front of a pool table. Anyone for *Grave of the Fireflies* pinball? ●



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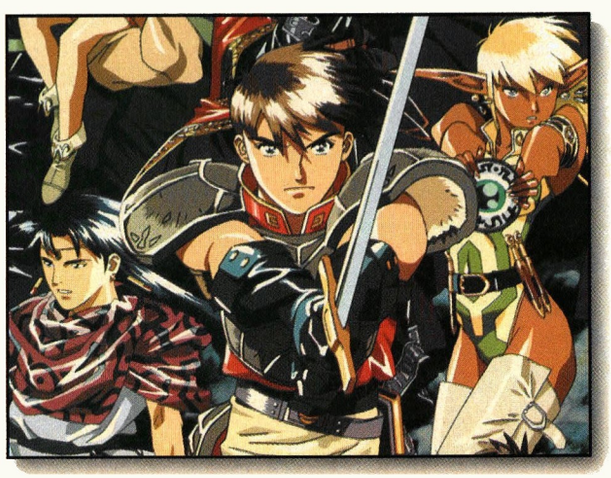
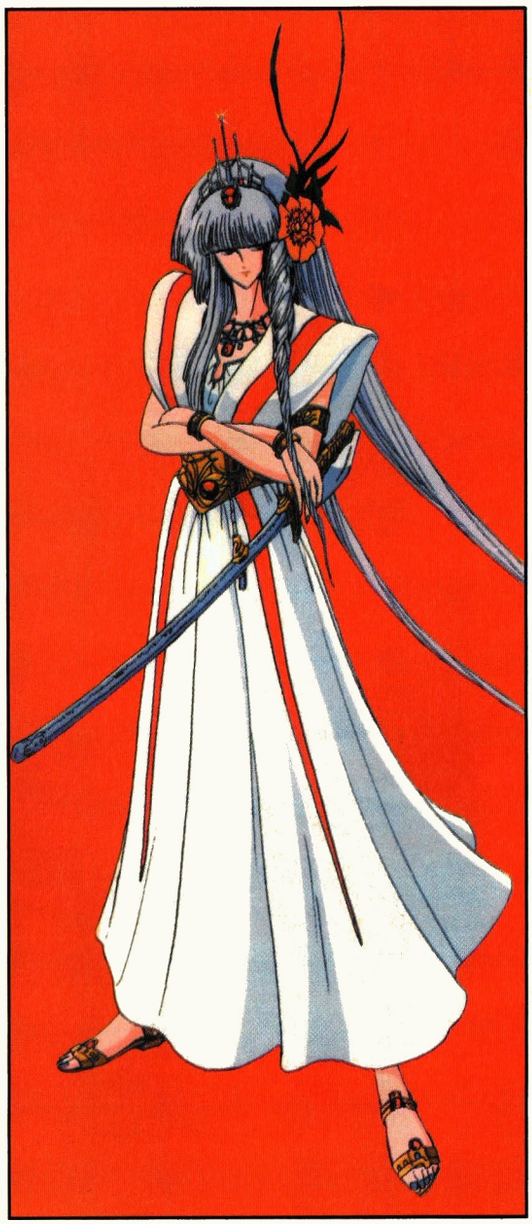
ADV BREAK FOR THE BORDER

In what is hopefully just the beginning of a new anime format, ADV have announced the release of the *Slayers* and *Crystania* 'motion pictures' on a multilingual DVD format. US fans who spend $30 on either of the new releases will not only have the option of dub or sub, but can opt for subtitles in English or Spanish, all from the same disc. It's only natural that such an initiative would come from the anime company that lies southernmost in the US, but if the experiment is a success, it bodes well for pan-European releases in several languages.●



FIVE STAR STORES



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Mamoru Nagano's *Five Star Stories* is now on sale in selected US bookstores. Retailing at a mere $8.98, the first volume of the long-running manga is now on sale in English at branches of the Japanese booksellers Kinokuniya. So lucky readers in San Francisco, San Jose, Portland, Seattle, LA, Costa Mesa, New York and Edgewater NJ can just walk in of the street, while the rest of us will have to order from *[city_name]***@kinokuniya.com**. (**kinokuniya** for the New York office and **nj** for Edgewater). And Kinokuniya are so sure of a crossover market, the English language version is actually being advertised in *Newtype*, in English! ●

BEBOP GROOVES

Japanese CD releases to look out for this month include the *Shenmu Orchestral Version* (pocx-1116), featuring music from the hit Dreamcast game, retailing at a cosy ¥2500. Yoko Kanno fans can look forward to the third soundtrack album from the wonderful *Cowboy Bebop*. *Bebop Blue* (vicl-60203) features 17 tracks of superlative Kanno for ¥3045, and (it says here) a special bonus 'blue' jacket if you buy the first pressing.

For those who can't get enough of *Cowboy Bebop*, there's also the forthcoming *Music for Freelance* remix album (vicl-60371), produced by director Shinichiro Watanabe and London's Frognation record label. Expect a *Manga Max* review as soon as humanly possible, or swing by **www.jvc-victor.co.jp/studio/m-serve/index.html** and see for yourself.●

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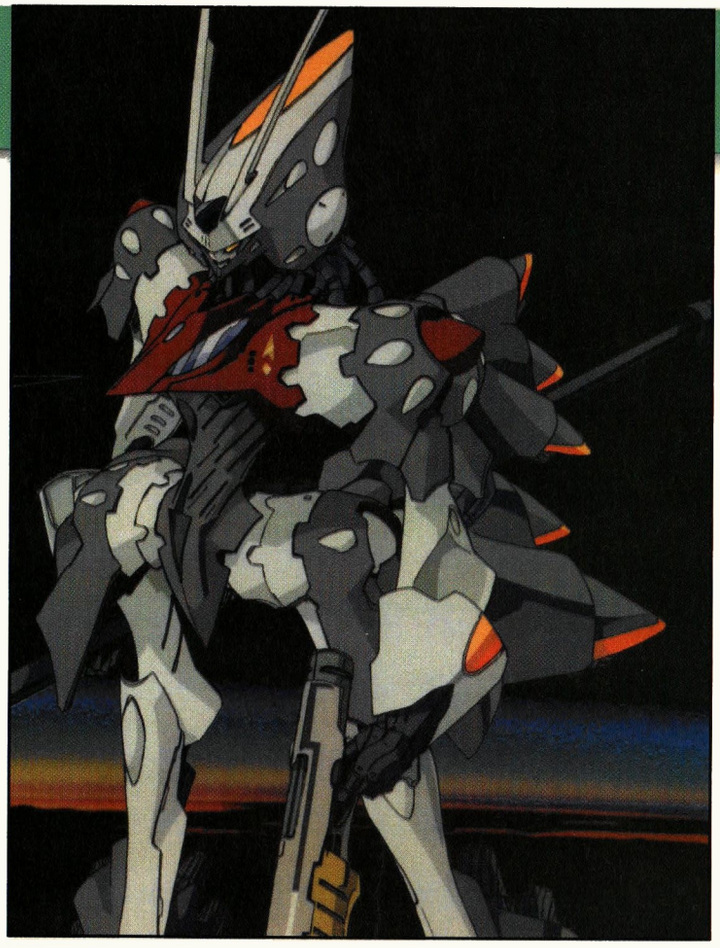
ALTERED States



In the far future, humanity has spread out among the stars. Gene manipulation technology has split the race into three distinct types – the Gene Liners who have combined with alien DNA, the Gene Majors who alter and adapt human DNA to assist their own evolution, and the Gene Minors who remain resolutely unaltered.

So begins the plot for *Schell Bullet*, a new collaboration just announced between *Five Star Stories*' Mamoru Nagano and *Utena*'s Kunihiko Ikuhara. Featuring swashbuckling tales of interstellar trade, aboard the Gene Liner clipper ship *Lone Balto*, *Schell Bullet* features much of the Nagano look, with model-thin waifs piloting giant cumbersome robots (or 'schells'). Ikuhara's role is less easy to define, though the script's emphasis on Gene Minor Ols Break, who boards the clipper with the intention of joining a Gene Major outfit and getting her own upgrade sounds not unlike the background to *Utena*.●

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Original Bondage Faeries #9
Kondom, B&W, 24pg, $3.50/£2.30

The Sex-Philes #7
Tamaoki Benkyo, B&W, 32pg, $3.95/£2.65

Silky Whip Extreme #3
Oh! Great, B&W, 24pg, $3.50/£2.65

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Mega Dragon & Tiger #5
Tony Wong, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95

Solar Lord #5
Khoo Fuk-Lung, 32pg, £2.50/£1.65

IRONCAT

Futaba-Kun Change! Vol 2 #7
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Masaomi Kanzaki, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95
Dynamite Super-Cowgirl has arrived to challenge the feline femme of the title.

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ADULT
More impossibly-pneumatic action from the genkiest clinic in Japan.

MIXX ENTERTAINMENT

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Naoko Takeuchi, B&W, 48pg, $2.95/£1.95

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Various, B&W, 128pg, $4.95/£3.30

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Kia Asamiya, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95#

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Pulp continues to bring you the best of mature Japanese comics, plus news, reviews, humour and more. Possibly the best English-language manga anthology outside Japan.

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Ranma Half Part 8 #4
Rumiko Takahashi, B&W, 32pg, $2.95/£1.95

Maison Ikkoku Part 9 #4
Rumiko Takahashi, B&W, 40pg, $3.25/£2.15

BOYS UNLIMITED

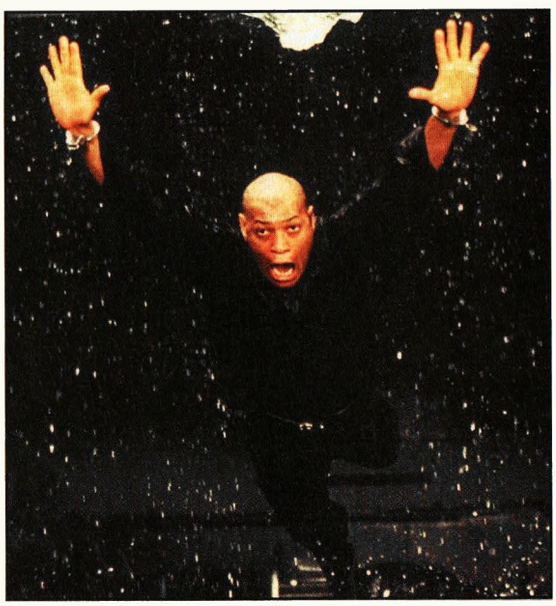
Turn all your speakers up to 11, because there's a new anime band in town. Directed by *Nazca*'s Hiroko Tokita from a script supervised by *St Luminous High School*'s Katsuhiko Koide, *Kaikan Phrase* has got a high-profile Wednesdy evening slot on TV Tokyo. Serialised in *Shojo Comic*, Mayu Shinjo's original manga is the relatively simple tale of a pop group composed of pretty young men. Guitarist Yuki has dreams of greater things, and with his drummer friend Santa he forms the two-piece rock outfit Crime. But when Crime doesn't pay (sorry, couldn't resist), the boys go back to square one, drag in some more talent and secure a debut recording opportunity from an indie label. But they still need a vocalist out front, and, somewhat fortuitously, Yuki finds pretty-boy Sakuya playing the piano in a hotel bar. With Sakuya singing, they've got everything they need, except perhaps for a lone groupie, in the form of the rhythm guitarist's classmate Lucy-May, who *Manga Max* suspects will end up playing a tambourine at the back and doing the band's horoscope. ●

© 1999 Mayu Shinjo/Shogkukan

WAREHOUSE of PAIN

With a stated aim of duplicating the feel of *Akira* and *Ghost in the Shell*, and fight choreography from *Drunken Master* director Yuen Woo-Ping, *Matrix* is a film that should be on any *Manga Max* reader's wish-list. And this time the Hollywood machine hasn't scrimped on Cantonese attention to stunt detail – major cast members were trained in kung fu and wire work for several months before filming began. Laurence Fishburne confesses that he had only seen a couple of Hong Kong action films before he signed up to play the revolutionary Morpheus. "This way, I couldn't get intimidated," he told *Cinefantastique* magazine. "If I had known what I was in for, I probably wouldn't have shown up." ●

Picture courtesy of Warner Bros.

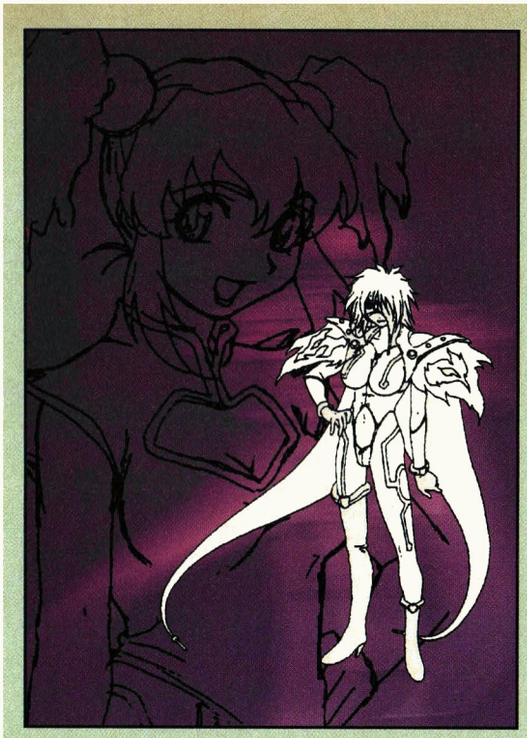


HORN BOY *in* FUNNY BUNNY VAMP CAMP

Just when you thought the dust had settled from *Power Rangers*, get ready for another deep and meaningful sentai series. But this one has a twist in the tail – taking elements from bog-standard kiddie team shows, magical-girl anime and late-night exploitation to make *Bunny Knights: Musketeers of the Millennium Kingdom*. But you'll have to stay up till two in the morning if you want to see it.

When anime fan Kazuyoshi hurts his neck in the company canteen, he is assigned the lovely Alice as a home help. But little does Kazuyoshi know that deep within him sleeps the soul of the ancient hero Arest Horn. And would you believe it: happy helper Alice, would-be model Akira and tough student Airi are all destined to be the knights of Arest, sworn defenders of truth, justice and the insanely-plotted way of all Japanese team shows. With us so far?

It gets better. Because the mystic knights of Arest must awaken before the dawning of the millennium, to defend the Earth from the depradations of the Vampire Amor. And that'll involve getting hold of the Millennium Sabre and transforming from real Japanese actresses into anime characters designed by Haruhiko Mikimoto! 'I want it to be like *Sailor Moon*,' enthused Airi actress Haruna Nagai. Superb. ●



HONKERS BONKERS

The arrival of a giant crystal causes havoc in the future city of Neo Hong Kong, sucking the pretty martial artist and games fan Hina Mitsurugi into an alternate world. There, she finds the four kings of this parallel Earth facing destruction at the hands of the evil Sapphire, and teams up with big sister figure Sindy Shahana on a quest for some of the mythical Protect Gear (wonder what that does...).

The traditionally-unwieldy title is *Super-Divine Princess Dangaizer III*, and as if the Hong Kong setting wasn't enough of a hint, the four-part video series is directed, scripted, designed and animated by the multi-talented Masami Obari, best known to *Manga Max* readers for his work on *Virus Buster Serge* and *Shadow Skill*. ●

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FAT STATS *for* ANIME CATS

According to figures just in, the Japanese are now making more television anime than ever before, beating last year's all-time record after only one season. Spring 1999 saw 56 anime series on at once, which means that a hypothetical anime fan wanting to see the lot would have to spend 35 hours a week just keeping up! General trends in television anime production have been rising ever since 1997, an increase which industry watchers ascribe to the watershed success of *Evangelion* the previous year.

Notable trends this season include a reduction in the amount of late-night anime, a shortfall that has been taken up by evening shows, demonstrating an increasing mainstream interest in animation. There has also been a slight increase in the number of morning kids' shows, reflecting what TV Tokyo's Keisuke Iwata has called 'a hot battle over children's programming'. *Manga Max* also notes a slight shift in the means by which anime fans are being served – though terrestrial broadcast has remained relatively constant for a couple of seasons, many of the extra shows are reaching their audience through cable and satellite. Considering the new boom in English-language sat/cable (News – MM5) and *Pocket Monsters*' premier run on the UK's Sky One, it would seem that UK fans and Japanese fans are starting to get their anime from the same sources... ●

(Coming in August from Viz)
Pokemon: The Electric Tale of Pikachu GN
Toshihiro Ono,160 b&w pgs, plus 4 colour, $12.95
The bestselling Viz Comic ever (#1 B&W comic in the US and a certified hit, with 100,000 copies sold) is now a graphic novel! As a special bonus for fans, this inexpensive graphic novel will contain 4 colour pages reproducing the cover art of the original 4-issue limited series. See the heroes of the TV series and video game in a new style in this fun-filled, all-ages comic collection! Ash Ketchum's Pokemon quest begins when he finds Pikachu living behind the wall of his house. His first challenge is to make friends with Pikachu, but it isn't easy with his rival Gary teasing him. Watch as Ash meets Brock and Misty; challenges Misty to a water Pokemon match at the Cerulean City Swimming Pool; goes in search of the elusive Clefairy; and must rescue his opponent Sabrina from a giant Haunter Pokemon! The adventure begins here!

Fushigi Yugi VOl. 1
Yu Watase, 200 B&W pgs, $15.95
The hit shojo (girls') manga! When best friends Miaka and Yui open an ancient Chinese book, they find themselves transported inside into the Universe of the Four Gods, a parallel world strangely like ancient China. Attacked by slavers and bandits, Miaka is rescued three times by Tamahome, a handsome young martial artist. When they are captured by the Imperial guards, things look bleak until Miaka is proclaimed to be the legendary Priestess of Suzaku, who was prophesied to come from another world to help the

kingdom of Suzaku in its time of need. But even as a guest in the palace, Miaka must deal with the affection of the lovestruck Emperor Hotohori, and the ire of Nuriko, Hotohori's would-be bride.

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In a past that never was, masked dandies, dastardly supervillains, and sentient machines stalk the streets of Steam City by night. Can wunderkind detective Narutaki, pretty nurse Ling Ling, and their robot Goriki thwart evil in this strange world?

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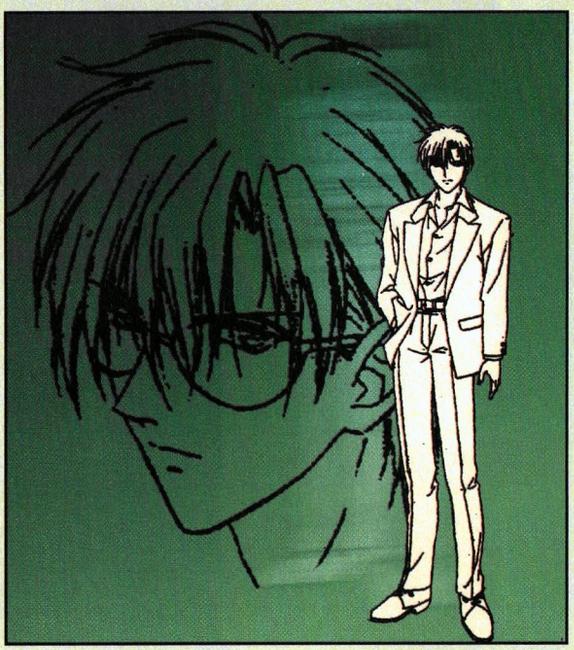
After a mysterious six-year absence, Kamui, a young man with awesome psionic powers, returns to Tokyo to be reunited with his childhood friends. But two sets of occult forces want Kamui to be their pawn: the Seven Seals, who protect the mystic symbols embodied in Tokyo, and the Seven Harbingers, who want to destroy the city-and the Earth. As alliances change, as his loved ones are threatened, Kamui must choose a side – or is his fate already preordained?

Video Girl Ai Vol. 3 (Video)
Masakazu Katsura
When Yota's VCR breaks down, Ai vanishes, leaving no trace of her in the real world except in the relationships of Moemi, Yota and Takashi. But all is not well, for the 'defective' video girl has been reclaimed by her creator, the heartless and mysterious Rolex. To save her from reformatting, Yota must enter the Video World, where illusions and dangers await him and force him to make a sacrifice for the girl he loves.
$24.98/29.98 sub/dub

Weiss Wash?

After a successful run in Sony's *You & Me* magazine, Maki Murakami's boy-love romance *Gravitation* is set for a two-part video anime release, coming in Japan late this July. Directed by *Haredoki Buta*'s Shinichi Watanabe from a script by Hiroyuki Kawasaki (also in this issue as the scribe for Seabass 123), it has the suspiciously-familiar sounding plot of a boy-band getting ready for their big recording break. But when the band Bad Luck have a long run of... well... bad luck, it looks like their career is over, unless, that is, they can resolve their differences through a lot of moody stares and frustrated lust. Alert readers wondering why we have the sudden interest in bands this issue can probably blame the runaway success of Weiss, the boy band comprised of voice actors who are doing very nicely, thank you, with their own concerts, albums and anime series. Will Bad Luck get similarly lucky? Only time will tell. ●



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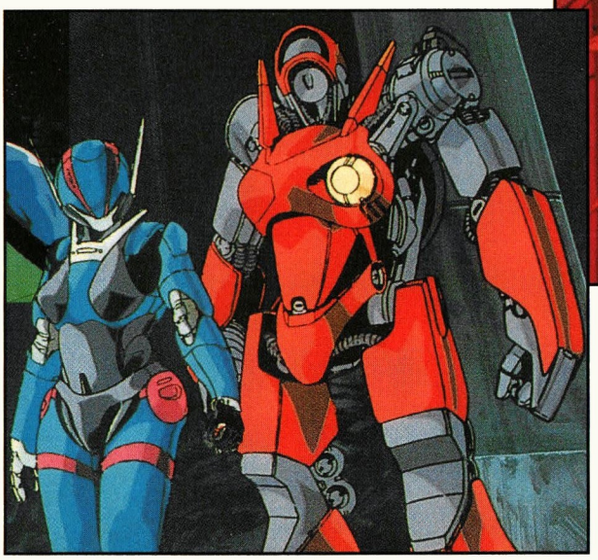
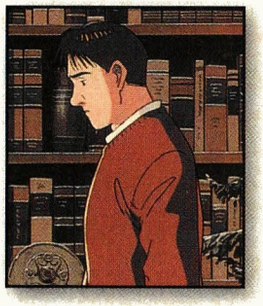
MVM on the MOVE

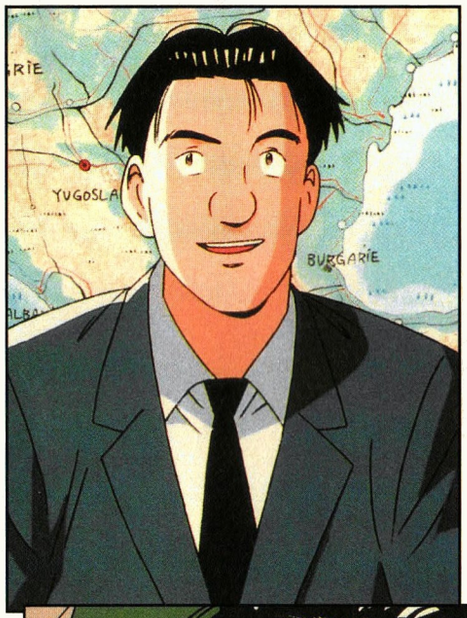
It's been a long while since anyone took the plunge in the volatile UK anime market, but long-time mail order manga people MVM have thrown their hat into the ring. Latching onto the long-dormant Animeigo licence, MVM have begun by rereleasing the Bubblegum Crisis series at a special bargain price, but haven't ruled out the possibility of bringing other, previously-unreleased Animeigo titles to the UK. Could UK fans finally get the chance to buy *You're Under Arrest*, *Spirit of Wonder* and the raft of Animeigo live-action titles available in the US? Watch this space.●

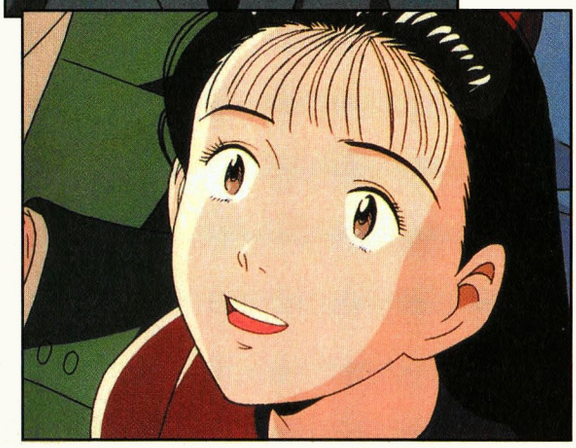


Spotlight on:

Master Keaton







Watching the opening credits you could be forgiven for thinking that *Master Keaton* was a muscular hero from the Irish tradition, not the quietly-spoken Anglo-Japanese insurance troubleshooter of the superior manga thriller. The swelling bagpipes, flutes, harps and drums, and the lush green landscapes full of standing stones only emphasise the extent to which cod-Celtic whimsy like *Riverdance*, *Braveheart* and *Titanic* have penetrated Japanese popular culture. Celtic heroes are the flavour of the month and it makes sense the Japanese would want to have one of their own.

If there is a problem with Keaton at all it is that he is not very English at all except, perhaps, in his self-effacing manner. There is no attempt to show a man torn between cultures. Instead, a tenuous Celtic connection is forged through flashbacks to his upbringing in Cornwall. In his uniform grey suit, Taichi Keaton is everyman – though as the credits make clear, he walks alone, even in a crowd. Oh, and he's kind to animals, too.

The England portrayed in *Master Keaton* is equally curious. Somewhere in Japan there's a crafty picture researcher who thinks she's gotten away with a blinder. She dashed over to London, picked up a couple of tourist postcards of black cabs, old red telephone boxes and Stonehenge, and then spent the rest of her time shopping. England turns out to be a twee place of cobblestoned streets and leafy countryside. London looks more like a middle-European city, Soho's Gerrard Street resembles Yokohama's more famous Chinatown, and in one blunder, Keaton's police pal Charlie Chapman is seen burning rubber in a left-hand drive Jag. The only sign that any research has been done at all comes when a character folds a copy of the *Daily Telegraph* carrying headlines on the most recent Serbian aggression and Glenn Hoddle's latest England team failure. This intrusion of the real world into the show's fantasy England is almost disconcerting.

But these are all minor cavils, for *Master Keaton* is a fine piece of television. Interestingly, the series draws on the gentler stories from the manga rather than the more action-oriented tales The resulting episodes are talky little character pieces that lean heavily on the writing. Keaton, here voiced by Tomohiro Inoue, is the likeable ex-SAS hero (here a Gulf War rather than Falklands veteran) whose journey of personal discovery threads the episodes together. He solves mysteries and helps old friends with intelligence and a quiet wit. But there is something very passive about the man. "You've become much more like a woman," an old university friend tells him, approvingly. Keaton's oh-so-cute daughter Yuriko walks all over him. Sometimes he does not act as a protagonist at all, but is simply present as a witness to events.

As in the manga, the Master Keaton show treats every day as a school day. The episode 'White Goddess', set on the Scilly Isles, packs in references to Robert Graves's dodgy piece of syncretism, the 1968 Czech uprising and also gives tips on anti-road protesting. The episode 'Trouble With A Lady' deals sensitively with the effects of the Russian occupation and the Iron Curtain on a family of Nazi-sympathisers. In 'Special Menu', the myths surrounding Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat-Sen's life in London are combined with a cooking lesson and some pointed (and entirely justified) sideswipes at the lack of an English palate.

If you can get past the hilariously inappropriate hurdy-gurdy music, there's a solid, grown-up series here that tackles some serious subjects and would probably make an easy transition to mainstream Western television. Seriously entertaining. ●

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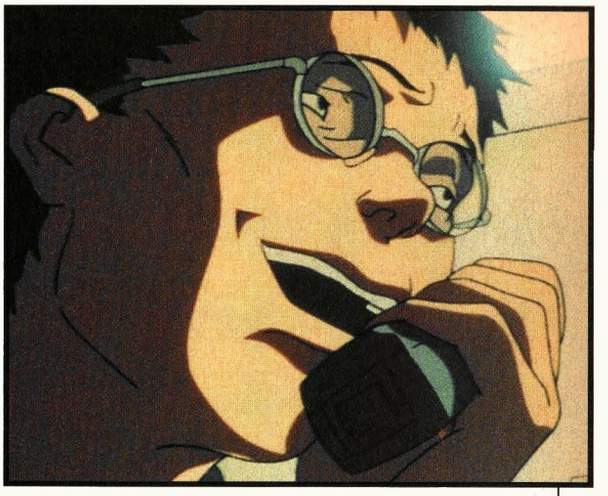
PERFECT
BLUE

As Perfect Blue finally premieres in London and Edinburgh, Manga Max corners director *SATOSHI KON* and takes a peek at author *YOSHIKAZU TAKEUCHI'S* follow-up novel.

'I wasn't that nervous because I enjoyed everything I had to do,' says Satoshi Kon of his directing job on *Perfect Blue*. 'I had drawn comics and had done some work in animation. But, what I found enjoyable was the process from writing the script to drawing the storyboard.'

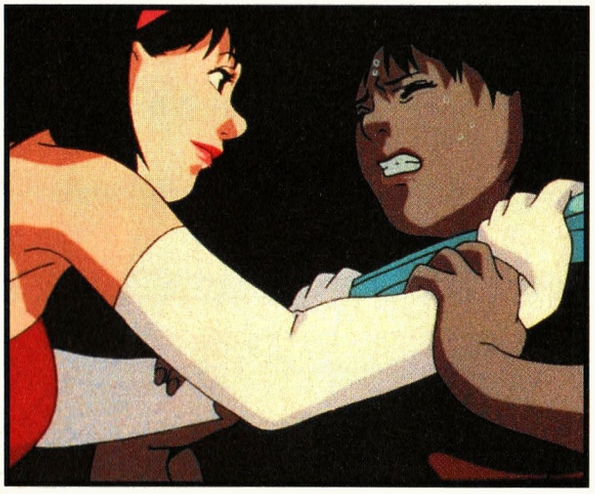
Claiming diverse influences from the time-wandering jump-cuts of George Roy Hill's *Slaughterhouse Five* to the real/unreal sleight-of-hand of Terry Gilliam's *Brazil*, Kon remains an artist at heart. Born on 12 October 1963, Kon was a comic artist whose first job in anime came with *Roujin Z* in 1990. Hired as a background artist for Hiroyuki Kitakubo's film of an ageing society, he distinguished himself early on by insisting on a 'real' look. 'On *Roujin Z* I was responsible for set design. On anime set design especially, the most important thing is to make this place look lived-in, somehow real. Even vaguely-placed background objects have to look as if they have a past, and came to be there through a process – anything but being drawn in position by a man with a pencil! So, for example, if I'm drawing a dirty apartment, there's someone who's been living there for quite a while, the areas around where he stuck posters on the walls have to be slightly discoloured.'

> "**On anime set** *design especially, the* **most important thing** *is to make this place look lived-in,* **somehow real.**"



After *Roujin Z*, Kon collaborated with Katsuhiro Otomo on *World Apartment Horror* (drawing the comic adaptation) and also performed layout duties on Masaaki Osumi's *Run Melos* anime. Background work followed on the 'Magnetic Rose' segment of Otomo's Memories, before Kon would be thrown in at the deep end helming *Perfect Blue* as director. Just how far could he take his penchant for realism in anime?

'If you compare animation to live-action films,' admits Kon, 'however hard I work to depict the ordinary, it's not going to work. In psychological horror stories, there are stereotypical offenders; a perverted man desiring to be a woman, or a paranoid-schizophrenic, for example. So, I settled on a central motif of a main character who is being destroyed by a strange stalker, and I focused on her psyche. I wanted the audience to feel the main character's feeling when she is being destroyed.'



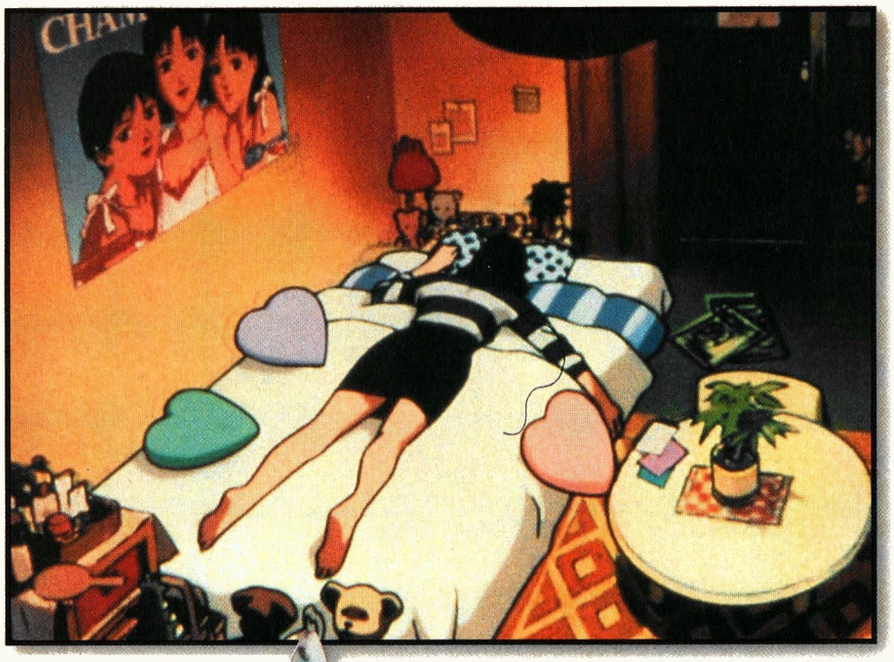
> "**we couldn't expect** *the audience to get interested in a character who* **merely "acted" suspiciously.** *So we actually changed him into* **a genuine murderer.**'"

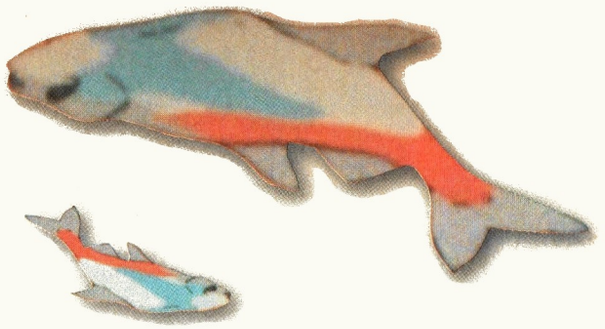
Kon was already altering the central premise of Yoshikazu Takeuchi's novel, which he admits he has never read. In the original story of *Perfect Blue*, author Takeuchi concentrates on the heroine, Mima, and her stalker Uchida in equal amounts. 'In the original version,' explains Kon, 'Uchida was a major character, but hardly did anything, and we couldn't expect the audience to get interested in a character who merely "acted" suspiciously. So we actually changed him into a genuine murderer.'

WHEELS WITHIN WHEELS

Other changes to the original were even more drastic. Screenwriter Sadayuki Murai came up with the idea of *Double Bind*, the television drama that forms a play-within-a-play. Time and again, the audience expectations are jerked in a new and unexpected direction, as what is supposedly real turns out to be a performance, and vice versa. Kon explains how much of the innovation in *Perfect Blue* was born out of a very mundane technical concern – trimming the running time down to fit a screening.

'The cuts were made because the running time was limited and nearly all the unnecessary footage turned out to be there to show the passage of time. We cut several scenes of escalating suspense that were originally there to show Mima's gradually-growing sense of fear. It's very difficult to give a sense of "gradually" when you don't have the time to do it, so that led us to





become bolder and cut most scenes in which anything happened gradually at all!

'We also used many jump-cuts to link separate episodes and as an expression of mental confusion. We'd cut fast from one thing to another as if it were a fight scene, even if there wasn't any action involved. It helped emphasise Mima's sense of confusion, such as when we jump from her opening concert scene to the very different shots of her everyday life. It's a scene that shows her with both her idol-mask and normal-mask on.

'With animation, there are many cases where the style is already fixed. For example, dream scenes have a pattern – you get wavy lines on the screen, or the scene switches to sepia tones

> "**We'd cut fast from** *one thing to another as if it were* **a fight scene,** *even if there wasn't any action involved. It helped emphasise Mima's* **sense of confusion,**"

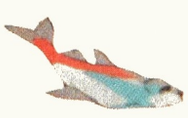
or the camera zooms in on cream swirling into coffee... or there is a close-up of someone's eyes. But that kind of editing is totally boring, and I think that there are many more ways of introducing dreams and flashbacks. I thought it would be interesting if the viewers did not immediately grasp they were watching a flashback or a dream. Viewers are too used to being treated kindly, so I've broken this pattern deliberately.'

BALL OF CONFUSION

'We don't need to be stalked by a murderous pervert to be confused in our everyday life. For example, going to pay an electricity bill or going out to meet somebody or to do something – these are all easy tasks that we perform without thinking. But, let's say you're depressed – I don't know, work's getting you down, or your girlfriend or whatever. You start having trouble performing even the simplest tasks. Once you can't handle one thing, you can't handle the next. Then the things get more and more confusing until you can't get out from a vicious circle.'

> "**let's say you're** *depressed – I don't know, work's getting you down, or your girlfriend or whatever.* **You start having** *trouble performing even the* **simplest tasks**"

For Kon, this simple observation is a key to many other forms of alienation. The same idea, of a fish out of water having to develop lungs or die, is something that dominates his thoughts for the film. 'For example, when you're a student, you find a place for yourself among your classmates. Then, when you grad-

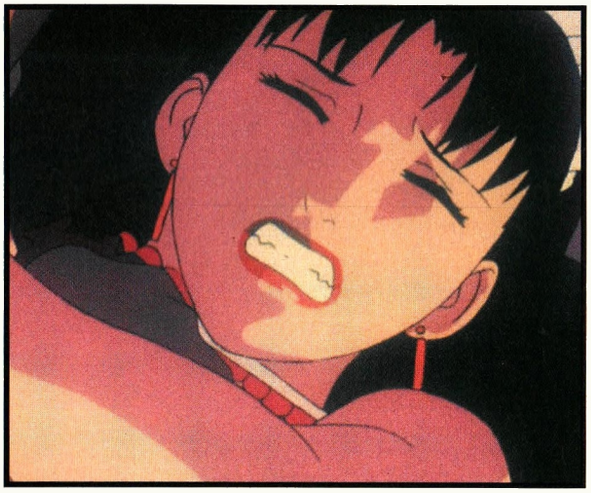


uate, the sense of value you had doesn't work any more and you have to build up a new sense of value in society. If you adapt fast, there is no problem, but if not, while you are struggling with it, everything starts to go wrong.' And does he see this as essentially what Mima goes through in *Perfect Blue*, when she leaves the cossetted world of pop stardom to become a serious actress? 'The confusion you have under those circumstances... that's the feeling I wanted to recreate so that the whole audience could relate to the thriller. Of course, you could just watch it as suspenseful entertainment, but I also wanted the audience to appreciate the mood. The film can be appreciated on two levels – some viewers look forward to finding out who the offender is or watching the action. But for those who want to see a deeper, unusual element, there is something in there, too.'

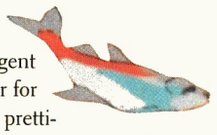
MANGA VS ANIME

Kon is first and foremost a manga artist. That was his original career, and it is still a heavy influence on his life (he once said that his ideal film project would be an adaptation of Otomo's *Domu*). But now he's been to the other side and found that the grass really is greener, how does he compare his two media?

'The biggest difference is time. The speed of reading comics depends on the reader. You can read 200 pages in 30 minutes, 15 minutes, or you can even take two hours to finish it. In films, though, especially cinemas, the audience sit down in the dark, and the creator can tell the story with his own rhythm. You can control 'time' for the audience in films, so in that sense, film is



SIMPLE RED



Moemi Ayase used to be an idol singer, but now she wants to be taken seriously. Her agent will hear nothing of it, and continues to push her for roles and events that emphasise her superficial prettiness. When she is approached by maverick genius anime director Kaname Ujiie, she sees her chance. "I am not just a cute doll," says the 23-year-old singer. "I am a voice actress. Please give me a decent job."

Ujiie has plans of his own, and offers Moemi the chance of a lifetime – the opportunity to star in a ground-breaking anime. But the dubbing session is to take place in an old mansion, on a deserted island, with only the unhinged director for company.

Within the confines of the labyrinthine building, the director who Moemi so admires turns out to be a lunatic, with torture chambers, a stalactite cavern full of dead bodies, a mad maid and a mysterious woman in a red dress. Ujiie rants that anime is the greatest art-form ever created by human being culture, because the characters can never deceive the creator. He hands her a script, the main subject of which is an eternal relationship, and asks her to become Miruka (the name of the character) both psychologically and physically. Through the voice recording with Ujiie, the world in anime fuses with the real world, and Moemi feels herself gradually becoming possessed by the role she is playing.

Writer Yoshikazu Takeuchi claims that *Simple Red* is a homage to many of his childhood influences – Roger Corman B-movies, the works of Edgar Allen Poe and, in particular, the story *Kojima no Oni* by the Japanese Poe-fanatic Ranpo Edogawa. It was also inspired by his own dissatisfaction with the original novel of *Perfect Blue*, which, because it was limited to a set word-count, did not give him enough space to enter his characters' inner motivations. While claiming to be very happy with Satoshi Kon's treatment of his work, Takeuchi wanted to try again for his own satisfaction.

In a departure from his normal method of working on squared paper, Takeuchi also wrote on completely blank sheets, without any guide for his pen. "The more I am involved with the fictional worlds I am creating," he says, "the more it distorts my handwriting and sends the words jumping outside the grid." His final manuscript, which contained sweeping giant characters and tiny, almost-unreadable scrawl, was described by the author as a "deed to kick the editor down to the bottom of hell."

Motoko Tamamuro

more interesting. On the contrary, in comics, I can spend more time to put various things in one particular panel and can create a hand-made effect. While I was making the film, although there was no audience of course, I imagined the communication with the audience, like "if I write in that way, they would react like this", kind of thing. That is interesting. You can push yourself not to care about anybody else, but I would rather have communication with the audience.'

'In contemporary Japanese animation, the basic concern is how much profit you could get through videos, films and television, because it's not a private work but a commercial work. Therefore, appealing to a certain type of fans – anime fans – is what matters. The more elements which would appeal to them, the bigger the budget you can get.

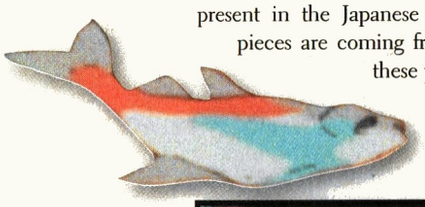
'The present situation won't change overnight. All I can do is, therefore, to step forward little by little. A couple of films is not enough. The public wouldn't approve unless I make five more, or ten. I am not pessimistic. There are many things I can do. At the present in the Japanese animation industry, many avant-garde pieces are coming from outside of the mainstream. I think these pieces will be approved by the public in the future and the range of the mainstream will then broaden.

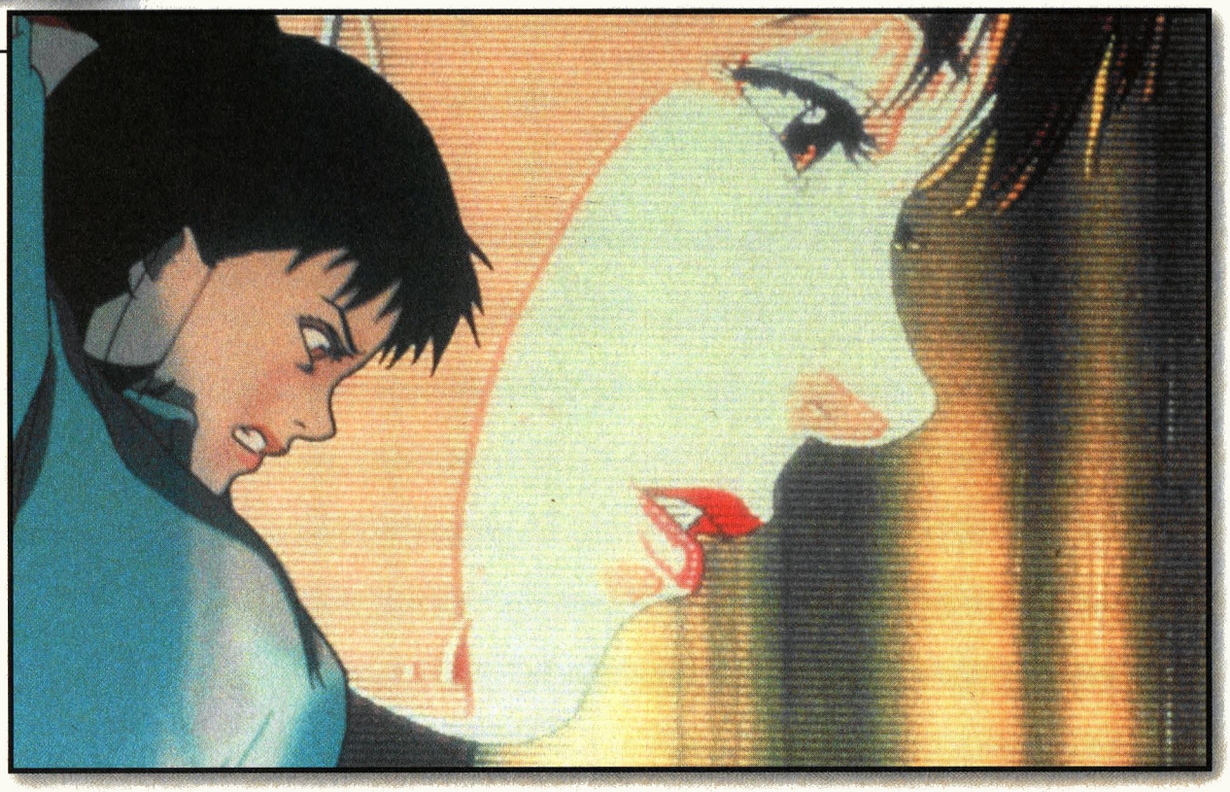
'The sponsors aren't a charity, so we should make a film which has commercial value, the kind that appeals to the public. I believe that we must consider the business side as we are not 'artists' as such, even though the work consists of artistic processes. For those who have to pay the bills, though, it is impossible to know whether it will be a good investment. Having said that, some people are interested in these minor works, so the next chance will come even though it might be a small project. I think it's fine. Because, as big a project as Hollywood will never come to a newcomer.'

"A couple of films is not enough. The public wouldn't approve unless I make five more, or ten."

And does Satoshi Kon have another project up his sleeve? 'Yes, I have. It would never have been taken seriously before, but now because of *Perfect Blue*, people listen to me. Of course I don't think what I did is no use. I want to make it a step to the future. So, I am not so pessimistic.' ●

This article contains unbroadcast footage from the *Dope Sheet* interview with Satoshi Kon, screened on Channel 4 on 12 January. The material that appears here does so for the first time in print, and is used with the kind permission of Liz Friend at Illuminations. Translations are by Motoko Tamamuro, Tony Kehoe and Jonathan Clements.





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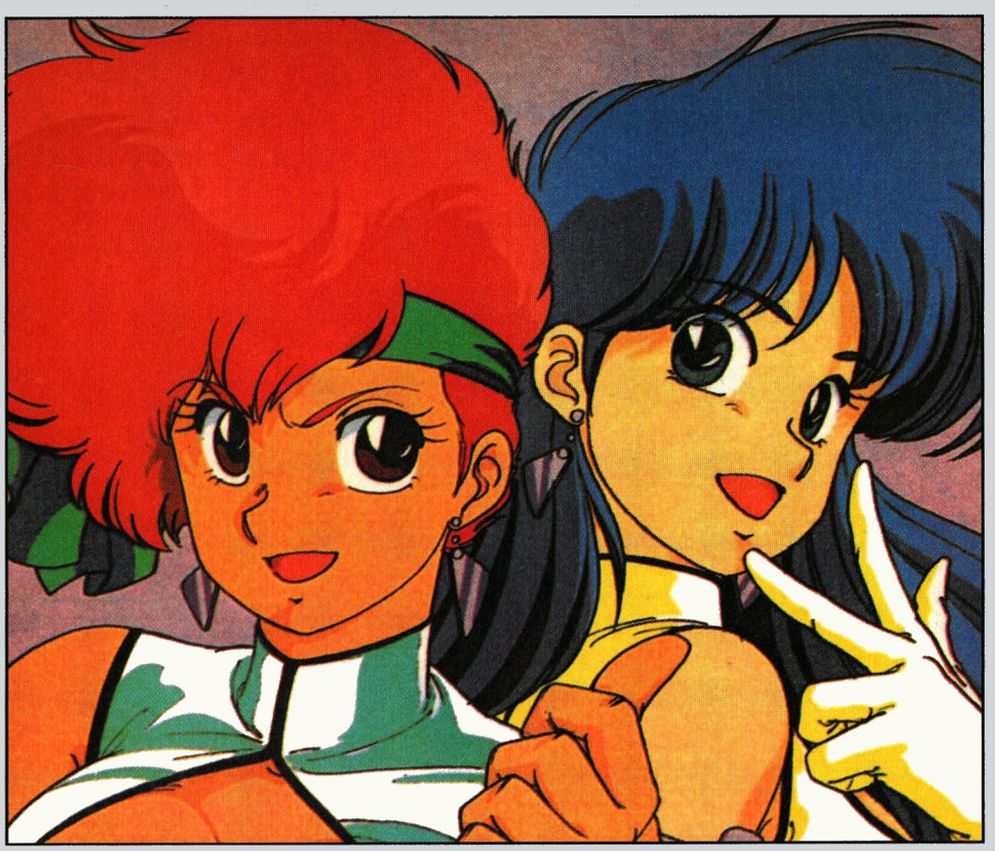
GIRL POWERED

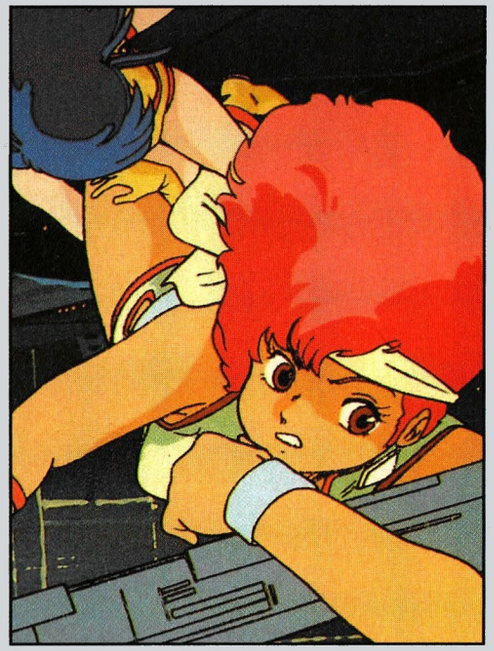
The Dirty Pair are back on video from AD Vision, but it's not Jim Swallow's fault...

The archetypal bad girls of anime, the Dirty Pair have been a part of the Western landscape of Japanese animation since the mid-Eighties, when the original television series first trickled into the United States from across the Pacific and into Europe via French and Italian television. But the series that our Romantic cousins called *Kate & Julie* was the vanguard of a multiple media hit that crossed national boundaries in ways that no other anime would. The Lovely Angels had arrived and the *Dirty Pair* were here to stay.

There's barely an English-speaking fan who doesn't know the lore of the Dirty Pair's world, but for those not in the know, it's a classic example of an entertainment concept with *legs* – four very shapely ones, in fact. Cute babes Kei and Yuri are Trouble Consultants for the Worlds Welfare Work Association (3WA), a kind of FBI for the benevolent galaxy-spanning United Galactica government; together with sidekicks Mughi (a bear-like cat) and Nammo (an R2D2-style robot), it's their mission to right wrongs and fight intergalactic crime wherever it rears its ugly head. But thanks to a preponderance of heavy weaponry and wildcard luck, their investigations usually cause more mass property damage than the crooks they're sent to catch. Code-named the Lovely Angels by 3WA command, the galaxy at large knows them by a less polite nickname: the Dirty Pair. If these girls are in your neighbourhood, you can bet that things are going to be blowing up any minute now.

To find the origins of the Dirty Pair, it's necessary to turn back the clock almost 20 years, to a partnership between award-winning Japanese SF writer Haruka Takachiho, who went on to create anime design house Studio Nue, and artist Yoshikazu Yasuhiko, who brought the manga *Venus Wars* and *Arion* to life. Takachiho and Yasuhiko had already been working since 1977 on a series of illustrated SF novels about a mercenary and his team called *Crusher Joe*, and as the economic boom decade of the Eighties dawned, Takachiho had a new idea – another series of novels, but this time starring two cute girls with firepower and attitudes to match. Legend has it that Takachiho was something of a ladies' wrestling enthusiast and a fan of two particular tag-teams; the Crush Gals and the Beauty Pair, and as such named his two creations after the female wrestlers. At the time the second *Dirty Pair* novel was released in 1983, *Crusher Joe* had made the leap to anime in a feature-length story, taking Kei and Yuri along for the ride in a cameo appearance during a drive-in movie. From here it was a logical





step to their own series, and in 1985, as the third *Dirty Pair* book went on sale, the girls got their own 26 episode television series from Nippon Sunrise. Although Yasuhiko had departed to pursue his own projects, Takachiho brought in *Urusei Yatsura* character designer Tsukasa Dokite (who would also later direct several episodes of the show) to give the Lovely Angels their television make-over, and later that year a more adult, realistic treatment for the first *Dirty Pair* feature-length video, *The Affair of Nolandia*. Dokite would continue to work as character designer on every following *Dirty Pair* anime until the end of the Eighties. The television series was a comic romp from start to finish, played for broad laughs and fast-paced action liberally spiced with parodies of contemporary media from *Star Trek*, *Where Eagles Dare*, *Terminator* and the *Indiana Jones* movies to classic SF and horror fiction like *Flowers for Algernon*, *Babel 17* and the works of H.P. Lovecraft. Sunrise aimed wide with the series and laid plans for the *Nolandia* original animation video to bookend the show's run.

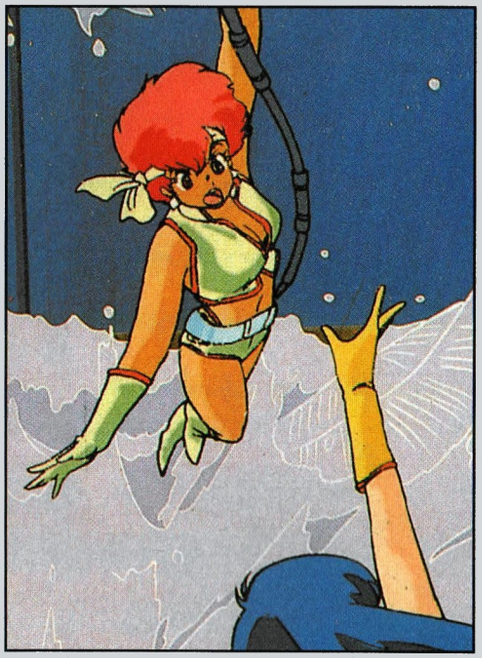
However, released during the boom in home video sales, in its initial incarnation *Dirty Pair* was only a mediocre performer, with its run cut short by two episodes due to slack audience ratings. Conversely, the new video market was exploding in size, and the release of *Affair of Nolandia* just prior to the television series' cancellation turned the fortunes of the Dirty Pair around. With a more hard-edged plot that harked back to the texture of the original novels, *Nolandia* was a hit on video, mixing a dramatic script by Kazunori Ito with Masaharu Okuwaki's (*Cats Eye*, *Mazinger*) direction. Touching on the telepathic abilities of Kei and Yuri for the one and only time outside the novels, this story involved the girls in a plan to control and dominate a psychic weapon for galactic conquest. Sunrise followed the *Nolandia* video with a release of the two unaired television episodes and subsequently a resurrection on cassette for the entire series. But while the Dirty Pair exploited a newly found domestic video audience who had suddenly 'discovered' the show, Kei and Yuri were already moving to the next level of the anime pyramid with *Project Eden*, their first theatrically released feature film.

Released in March of 1987, written by Hiroyuki Hoshiyama and directed by Kouichi Mashita, *Project Eden* successfully blended the babes-and-bullets mayhem of the TV series with the more serious science fiction tropes of *Nolandia* and Takachiho's novels. The plot featured a lunatic scientist's plans to unleash the dormant creatures living within a unique alien ore, despite the fact that every warp-drive starship ever built has an amount of this substance in its engines. 1987 was also an important year because it marked the first appearance of the *Dirty Pair* in the English language, with a translation of the first book, *The Great Adventure of Dirty Pair*. In the following year the first *Dirty Pair* comics were published – but in an interesting turnabout, they were produced by Canadian writer Toren Smith and American artist Adam Warren. The *Dirty Pair* comics would prove popular enough to foster a dozen follow-ups that look set to continue well into the new millennium. Other comic incarnations of the characters would also follow, in the form of Viz's 'photo-story'-style *Dirty Pair Anime Comics*, but for the most part, many current anime fans' first exposure to the *Dirty Pair* has been through the pages of Smith and Warren's version of the duo. Aside from a short strip in a 1986 *Dirty Pair* 'Mook' (a magazine-format book), there has yet to be a true *Dirty Pair* manga.

1989 saw the series return in an episodic form, but the lessons about television's fickle audiences had been well learnt and this new *Dirty Pair* saga was released as a five-part video series, featuring

two 25 minute stories in each instalment. Like *Project Eden*, these versions of Kei and Yuri had found their feet with a stable mix of science fiction and comedy. Halloween parties, child-prodigy wargamers, space truckers and catastrophic weddings were the order of the day. Western fan audiences continued to import the anime across the Pacific, and as the first decade of the *Dirty Pair* ended, the show was a regular fixture on convention programs and fan subtitler's lists alike.

The first English-language release of the Lovely Angels' adventures was Streamline Pictures' dubbed version of *Project Eden* in 1990; at the same time in Japan, the Dirty Pair returned once more with a single one-shot video, *The Flight 005 Conspiracy*. Directed by Toshifumi Takizawa, Fuyushi Isutake's script recalled ideas from the original series, but maintained the less comic tack of *Project Eden* and *Nolandia*, with an SF techno-thriller plotline. Perhaps the least 'funny' of all the *Dirty Pair* stories, *Conspiracy* is rife with intrigue and features such serious matters as political power-games and industrial espionage, told against the backdrop of an investigation into the bombing of a spaceliner.



While *Dirty Pair* continued to be a success in its US-made pseudomanga form throughout the early Nineties, it was not until 1994 that Kei and Yuri returned to the animated medium. However, this version of the Lovely Angels stirred up controversy and division among fans. Rather than continue on with the Dirty Pair as they had been, Takachiho had created a whole new series of both novels and anime videos recounting the early years of the characters, with designer Takahiro Kimura regressing Kei and Yuri into more flamboyant and stylised teenagers. *Dirty Pair Flash* was born. Unwilling to rest on his laurels, the author also took the characters to yet another new medium, the Internet, by serialising the novel *A Legend of Dictator* on the Microsoft Network in 1998, the year in which *Dirty Pair Flash* was dubbed into English. Despite some negative reactions from *Dirty Pair* purists, Takachiho's revision proved to be a hit. Tsukasa Sunaga's scripts for the first six-part series re-introduced the girls in a madcap string of adventures closer in tone to the first television series than any other rendition that had gone before, and set the pace for Takachiho to pen two more five-part OAVs the following year. *Dirty Pair Flash* 2 played with the episodic feel of the series by setting it in a *Westworld*-type 20th century Tokyo theme-park (allowing for plenty of scope to parody other anime set in contemporary Japan), while *Dirty Pair Flash* 3 has largely returned to the format of the first *Flash* series.

With their success in dubbing the exploits of the youthful Kei and Yuri in *Dirty Pair Flash*, distributor AD Vision have followed up with the 1989 video series under the somewhat misleading title of *Original Dirty Pair*. To date, the Streamline versions of *Affair of Nolandia*, *Project Eden* and *Flight 005 Conspiracy* have yet to see a release outside the United States, but for fans both in the West and the East, the Dirty Pair are about to enter their third decade with no signs of slowing. So board up your house and move to the moon, because you never know if their next assignment might be in *your* city.. ●

DIRTY PAIR DATA FILE

Dirty Pair (26 episode TV series) 1985-86
Dirty Pair (26 episode TV series) video release 1986-87
Dirty Pair: The Affair of Nolandia (OAV) 1985, English language dubbed release 1994
Dirty Pair: Project Eden (feature film) 1987, English language dubbed release 1990, re-release 1994
Dirty Pair (10 episode OAV series) video release 1989, English language dubbed release 1999
Dirty Pair Flash (6 episode OAV series) video release 1994, 6 tapes, English language dubbed release 1998
Dirty Pair Flash 2 (5 episode OAV series) video release 1995, English language dubbed release 1998
Dirty Pair Flash 3 (5 episode OAV series) video release 1995-6, English language dubbed release 1998

TRUE
ROMANCE

It's lazy journalism to lob around made-up adjectives like 'Tarantino-esque' at any movie involving guns, but at times there seemed hardly a facet of *Shark Skin Man & Peach Hip Girl* which was not informed by a certain former video-store clerk. The structure is reminiscent of *Pulp Fiction*, starting with a robbery whose significance is only truly apparent when it's revisited right at the end, while the 'couple on the run' theme is straight out of *True Romance*. And when you see two killers sitting in a car, having a banal conversation (about yoga books rather than cheeseburgers), then you can be pretty sure you're on Tarantino turf.

Fortunately, the pop-culture references are largely lost on their way from the Far East, and in any case, Tarantino homage is not all *Shark Skin Man* has to offer. Not when there are also the works of David Lynch to plunder. *Wild at Heart* can also be ticked off, for a relative of the errant couple has hired a somewhat bizarre private detective-cum-hitman (Tatsuya Gashuin) to track them down. It would be easy to go on, especially when half the actors seem to be doing their best

As Shark Skin Man & Peach Hip Girl gets its UK premiere, JIM MCLENNAN and JONATHAN CLEMENTS check out the film and manga, while STEPHEN SARRAZIN interviews director KATSUHITO ISHII.

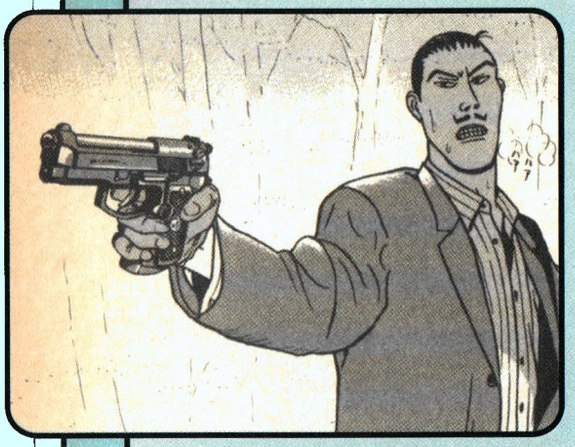
to imitate Westerners as well – it's no stretch to imagine Johnny Depp playing the hero instead of Tadanobu Asano. It's also interesting to note that both have had careers a little out of the mainstream. Asano seems to prefer to work with mavericks, in the same way that Depp gravitates towards the likes of Tim Burton and John Waters.

In terms of storyline, the movie remains *fairly* faithful to Minetaro Mochizuki's 1993 comic. Toshiko Momojiri (Shie Kohinata), a girl working in the hotel of her 'uncle', has her life thrown upside-down when she runs across Samehada (Asano), a gangster trying to escape his former colleagues. She flees along with him, though this is the beginning, rather than the end, of their problems.

Which is a good thing too, as said 'problems', in the shape of Samehada's former boss Mr Tanuki and his motley crew of freakazoid killers, are the most interesting things the film has to offer. The director devotes as much screen-time to them as the hero and heroine – entirely justifiable since they form a fascinating bunch of weirdos. Most notable of all is Mitsuru (Shingo Tsurumi), Tanuki's son – he's a peroxide-blonde punk who can smell his prey, and whose idea of a good time is playing Russian Roulette with FIVE loaded chambers. The film explodes into life – and frequently death – whenever he and the rest of the gang are around; particularly notable is their first brush with Samehada, in a motel, which is a fine example of bullet-propelled mayhem.

MOCHIZUKI'S MANGA

Shark Skin Man, as anyone with a copy of *Manga Mania* #42 already knows, is based on a comic by Minetaro Mochizuki. Mochizuki's works cover many different genres, but are linked by one of the strongest scripting sensibilities in the medium. This is perhaps why two of his stories have already made it to the screen – the perennial difficulties of stripping a zillion-volume comic into its salient parts just don't apply.



Mochizuki's other works are equally tempting to film makers. He first appeared on the scene in 1985 with *Swimming Upstream*, a six-volume romance about Kaoru, a boy who joins the school swimming team to impress his would-be girlfriend Sonoko (this has also been adapted into a live-action film and will also be shown at this year's London Pan-Asian Film Festival). It also features a spunky female motorcycle mechanic chasing after our hero, reflecting an interest in bikes that would return in 1989 with Mochizuki's four-volume *Bike Maaan*. Originally serialised in *Young Mama* magazine, Kodansha's beautifully-targetted niche publication for motorcycle chicks with a bun in the oven, it wackily crashes *Tetsuo* into *Thomas the Tank Engine*, featuring hero Bonny, permanently melded with his Triumph after an accident. With his face sticking out where the headlight should be, he competes with Dotokin, another vehicular symbiote, for the affections of his rock-and-roll sweetheart. 1991's *Family Room* (based on a 1989 short-story) is far more down-to-earth – a sequel to *Swimming Upstream*, it takes the lead characters Kaoru and Sonoko through university and into the real world, where their strange relationship comes under strange pressure from society at large.

Mochizuki returned to the slightly-surreal in 1993 with the one-shot *Room Service*, in which a ghostly girl appears out of nowhere and stalks an unsuspecting college kid. Full-on weirdness returned in 1994 with *Dragon Head*, a much longer, apocalyptic science fiction epic, featuring two Japanese children trapped underground by an accident in a bullet-train tunnel. They wander through the hellish world that was once the Tokyo subway system, encountering tribes of savage survivors, and searching all the while for a way out.

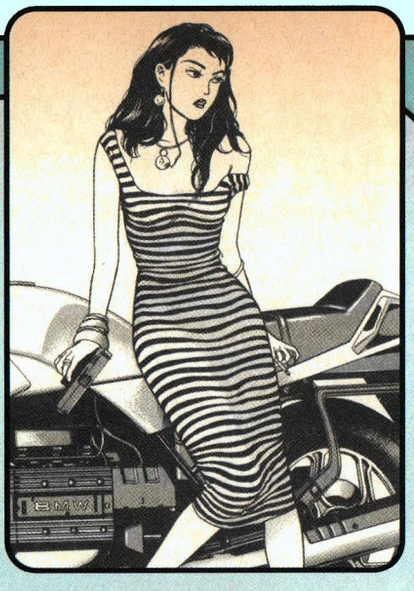
For a first-time, low-budget filmmaker, the *Shark Skin Man* manga must have proved overwhelmingly tempting.

But it's *Shark Skin Man*'s heady mix of romance and gunplay that was bound to attract the most attention, and not just for thematic reasons. For a first-time, low-budget film maker, the *Shark Skin Man* manga must have proved overwhelmingly tempting. A self-contained story with a clearly-defined beginning, middle and end, it featured a small cast, very little in the way of special effects (Ishii could have got away with a few squibs and a car he didn't mind crashing) and the opportunity to film entirely on location in hotel rooms and deserted country roads. All these things considered, it remains a mystery why Ishii should *add* so much of his own.

MAGIC MOMENTS

Many of the film's most memorable moments are not from the comic at all, but from the script penned by Ishii himself. Yamada, the dorky, effete, incompetent hitman in a tank-top (think Mr Bean with a sniper rifle) is a funny, psychotic, award-winningly original creation, and yet doesn't exist in the comic. Neither does Sawada (Susumu Terajima), the eternally-loyal best friend of Samehada, who chats to God about his role in the plot and strides around in the background like Christopher Walken waiting for a chance to get managerial on someone's ass.

The blossoming romance, which lent a *why-Miss-Perkins!* charm to the gradual metamorphosis of Toshiko from blue-stocking into gangster babe, and of Samehada from thoughtless spiv to special lover, is one of the casualties of the extra screen-time allotted to the supporting cast. Inevitably, this focus does lead to an apparent weakening of the relationship between Toshiko and Samehada, because there isn't sufficient time devoted to it. They barely seem to be more than casual acquaintances at best, and they could have done with borrowing some of the Nicolas Cage/Laura Dern passion from *Wild at Heart* as well. This means that when Toshiko is captured by Samehada's gang-buddy Sawada, his rescue mission seems less the act of a vengeful lover, and more that of an idiot.



Many of the film's most memorable moments are not from the comic at all, but from the script penned by Ishii himself.

In a pleasantly circular fashion, everyone ends up back at the hotel from where Toshiko originally escaped, and it's not giving too much away to say that any sequel will need to find replacements for most of the characters, for the ending is heroic bloodshed of which John Woo would be proud. Before things get that far, we can discover that the private eye's interest in the case is more personal than you'd think, see that Japanese public toilets are built to last, and also wince at a truly savage baseball-bat assault.

Once the disparate threads of the plot begin to come together, this is a sharp and evocative (if noticeably derivative) thriller. Asano exhibits undeniable charisma on-screen, even in the simplest of actions, and most of the supporting cast are impressively drawn. First-time feature director Ishii is a promising new talent, and while he brings a lot of influences to the party, they are given enough new angles to make it seem more than a mere collage of his favourite cool bits from Nineties Hollywood. ●

SAILOR & LULA an interview with KATSUHITO ISHII
Tokyo, February 1999.

Katsuhito Ishii: I studied art at university, and I was really into pop art, Warhol and all that. The university didn't really offer a program in it, but did teach graphic design. I also played in a band, and became interested in animation. I was attracted to live-action films, but I didn't have any kind of budget that would have allowed me to 'perfect' the work the way I did with animation. I was already very preoccupied with the quality of the image. Later on, there was a guest teacher at our university, a film maker who had won some prizes – including at Cannes, I believe – and he saw my short films and gave me the confidence to continue. People in advertising saw them, too – there was a 'pop' graphic style they liked, so I started making commercials. The next step was connecting with a production manager at Tohokushinsha, and that led to my first short fiction film, *The Promise of August*, with the comic actor Dankan, which received positive reviews. It was shown in several theatres, for the late shows.

Manga Max: What was The Promise of August about?

Not much, to tell you the truth! For me, at that time, so much of Japanese cinema seemed driven by themes, and I wanted to explore simpler things, and react against that kind of film. I was looking at a lot of American TV back then, small shows with people making small talk, and I wanted to try something along those lines. There was one show, I've forgotten the title, but I liked the premise. The action took place in a summer camp, and two of the kids on holiday were Martians, ETs, and the other kids didn't mind at all.

You said you were reacting to certain films. How about today, are there young directors with whom you feel some kind of affinity?

Well some of my classmates also became film makers, although many of them are still working in advertising and commercials. But there is one director I find fascinating, he worked with Katsuhiro Otomo on *Memories*. His name is Koji Morimoto. And speaking of animation, there's a short film that Asano watches on TV in *Shark Skin Man*, which was made by a friend of mine.

What attracted you to Minetaro Mochizuki's manga?

After my short film, I began talking with friends and associates, about making a real film, a feature film. So I went out looking for material, and one day, in the manga section of a bookshop, I came across *Shark Skin Man*. Right there it seemed easy enough to adapt. And I liked it right away. I was just drawn to the action elements in it, and how the characters jumped from the pages. It was simply a reaction of 'this is it, I'm going to make this'.

So you went to Tohokushinsha with this project, it wasn't a commission, or a producer's idea?

Originally, someone else was going to do it, and then it fell through. I had been interviewed about what I was going to do after *The Promise of August*, and I mentioned wanting to do *Shark Skin Man*. So the writer found out about it, he and the producers saw my short film and the commercials, and said 'fine'.

The casting in your film is exceptional, and I wondered how difficult it was to get all those people together.

In a way it was difficult because I knew all these talent agencies and producers from my work in commercials, and at first I had to reject a lot of people being sent my way for this film. As for the actual performers in *Shark Skin Man*, I approached each of them directly.

Certainly one of the real pleasures of your film was to finally see Tadanobu Asano and Susumu Terajima working together.

From the beginning I wanted something eclectic in the casting. Actors are often typecast in certain roles, like Asano has played a lot of 'perverse' parts, while Terajima was in a lot of 'cool' serious films – like all the films by Takeshi Kitano. I wanted to break those habits. The other thing that I was particularly happy with was to get Tatsuya Gashuin *[aka Akira Wakato – Ed.]*, the actor who plays the hitman, Yamada.

He just about steals the show. I just can't forget him. Where does he come from?

He was famous once, not anymore. I don't know his whole life story, but he became famous by doing impersonations. This was perhaps three, four years ago then he kind of faded out. But I remember, when I was a student, that I'd kid around with my friends saying I'd use this performer some day, as a killer, and it came back to me during the casting. He's also a musician, and he's been working in the karaoke industry.

I found the structure of the screenplay remarkably self-assured for a first feature, notably the use of the first scene, the robbery, which progressively punctuates the entire film until Asano and Terajima realise who the woman is. Was that idea there from the beginning?

One of the earlier producers on the film had told me 'you've never written a feature screenplay before, so why don't we bring in a professional writer so he can go over certain scenes' and I agreed. But the writer was going over pretty much *everything*. At one point we both showed what we had written, and the producers went with what I had done, so I told them to let me do the whole thing. It took me about a year.

The idea [of the robbery] itself was more or less there in the manga, but I added something to the ending, the idea of the realisation.

Can we talk about the important influences on the film? Could you comment on the Tarantino influence?

Before making the film, I closely studied Tarantino's films as well as those of Takeshi Kitano. In *Pulp Fiction*, I liked the way the two characters are talking in the opening scene of that film. I liked the feel of that scene, and tried to do a variation on it by opening mine with a post office robbery, rather than at a diner.

The Kitano influence is definitely there in the use of timing, in the use of ellipse. In your film, there are many examples of this, as when Asano steals the corvette. We hear the sounds of a scuffle, but just see the aftermath: the man on the ground as Asano drives off.

You're absolutely right, and I'm quite fond of jump cuts. However, I used the sound and music in a very different way from Kitano's films. The one film of his that really was an influence was the second one, *Boiling Point*.

What's your next project?

For now, a short film, a kind of situation comedy set in a hotel room. I was lucky, my art director worked with Hal Hartley, on *Flirt*, and Kiyoshi Kurosawa's *CURE*. And the person who did the optical effects had worked on Shunji Iwai's *Swallowtail Butterfly*. Furthermore, as a commercial director for Tohokushinsha, I have unlimited access to this wonderful machine called Domino, by Quantel. I think it's the only one in Japan, and there's so much I can do with it, like the title sequence at the beginning of *Shark Skin Man*. After this short piece, I plan to do another feature. ●

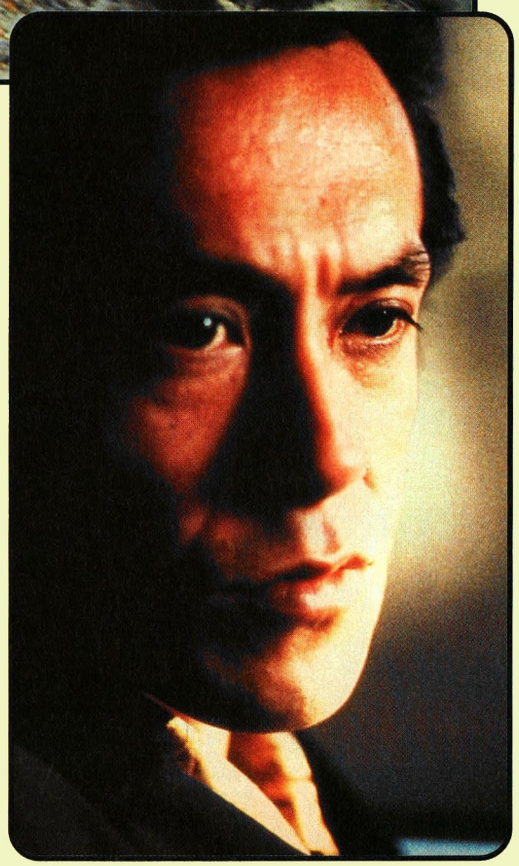
Shark Skin Man & Peach Hip Girl will be screened at the launch event for the London Pan-Asian Film Festival on 3 June. Countless thanks to Yoshiko Okura for translation and Stephen Cremin for materials.

The forest is very reminiscent of Twin Peaks: the hotel is close by, the hero goes back to rescue his girlfriend, etc.

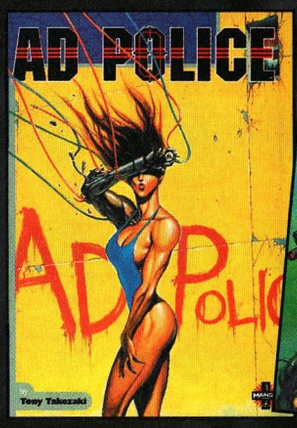
Right, but it's only the closing scene that's like that; the rest of the time, the forest has little to do with that. No, it's Lynch's sound design that made an impact on me. I spent several months working on it.

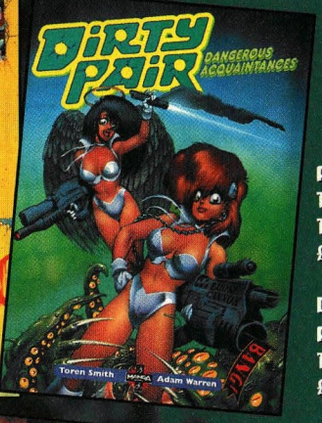
Let me try one more Lynch allusion, and I believe it's the major one in your film. Shark Skin Man & Peach-Hip Girl is your variation on Lynch's Wild at Heart. We have two runaways, but instead of having the crazy mother we have the love-crazed hotel manager, who has Yamada instead of Harry Dean Stanton chasing them. And the film moves from violence to innocence. At times your film feels like Lynch adapting a manga, or Kitano doing a book by Barry Gifford.

Wow! You're the first one who noticed it! Yes, absolutely, *Wild at Heart* is a crucial reference.



BABES, BULLETS AND BUBBLEGUM...





AD Police
Toschimi Suzuki and Tony Takezaki
£7.99 (M7001)

Dirty Pair: Dangerous Acquaintances
Toren Smith, Adam Warren
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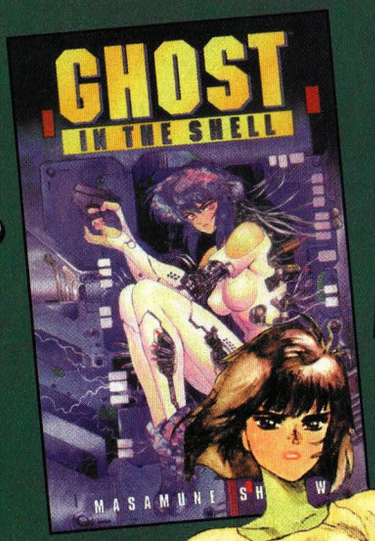
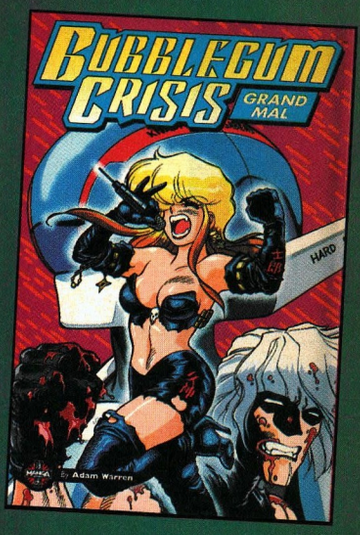
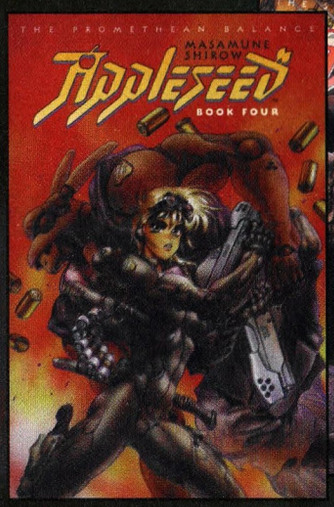




Bubblegum Crisis: Grand Mal
Adam Warren
£9.99 (M7028)

Ghost in the Shell
Masamune Shirow
£16.99 (8899)



Appleseed Book 1
Masamune Shirow
£9.99 (0673)

Appleseed Book 2
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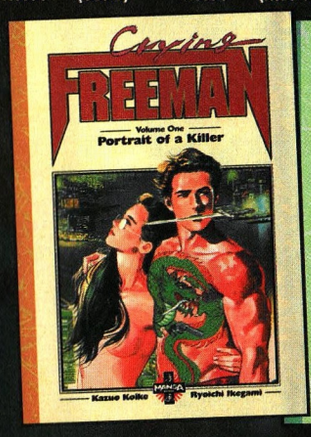

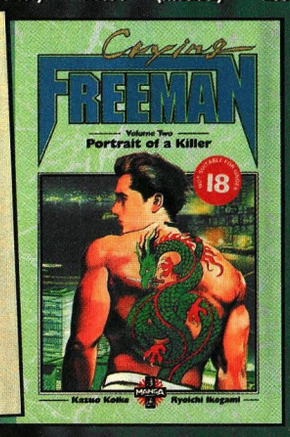

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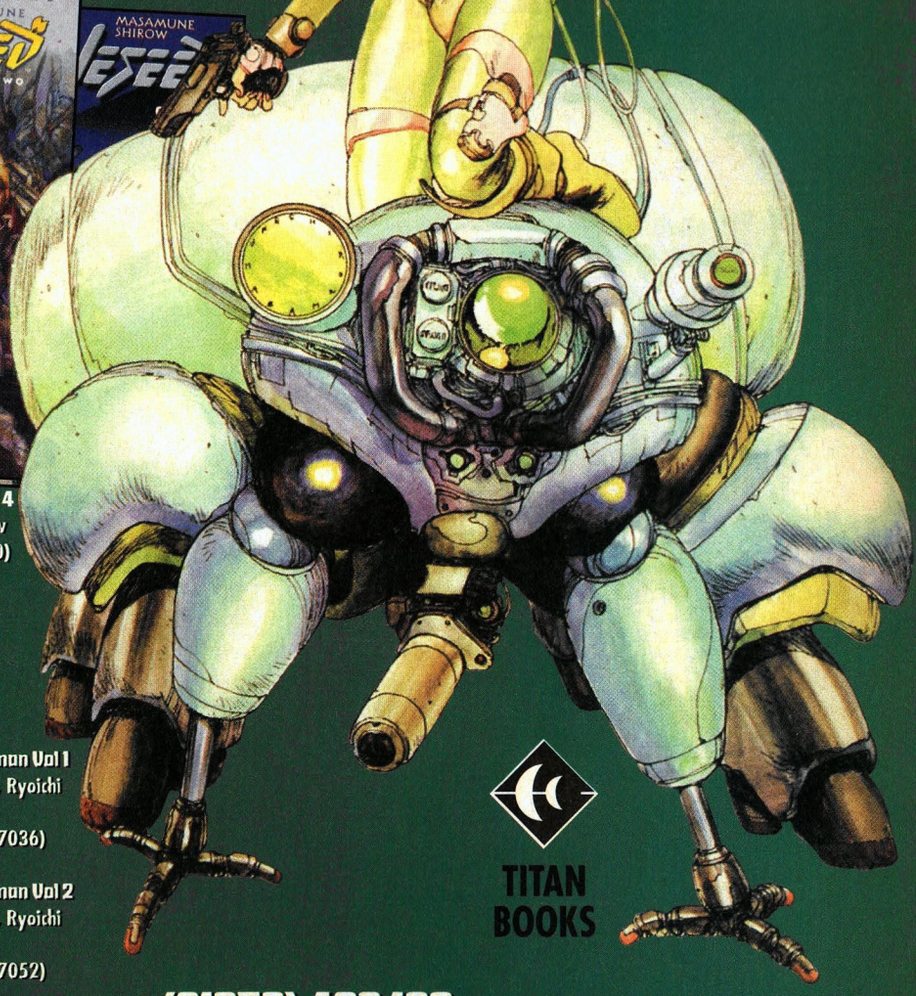

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パラサイト・イヴ
THE SELFISH GENE

パラサイト・イヴ

With the game out in the US and rumour that Madonna (no less) has optioned the screenplay rights, it's time for LEE BRIMMICOMBE-WOOD and MOTOKO TAMAMURO to look at the many mutations of *Parasite Eve*...

Ever wondered about mitochondria? Little beggars that sit inside every cell of your body, producing energy? Ever wondered what might happen if they had a mind of their own? If they revolted and tried to take control of your body?

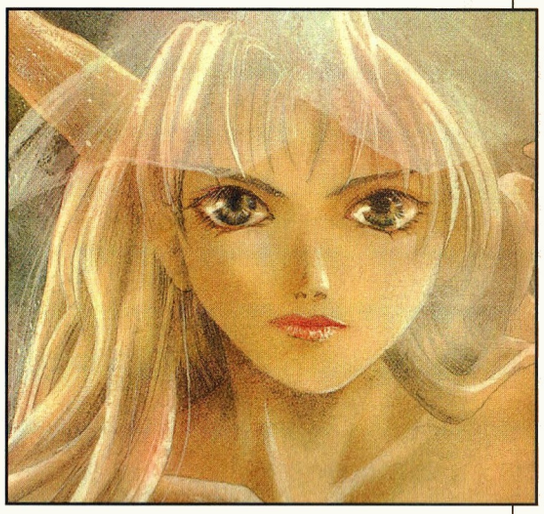
Student doctor Hideaki Sena wondered, wrote a bestseller around the idea, and sat back to rake in the bucks. The medical-gothic novel that resulted, *Parasite Eve*, was released by Kadokawa in 1995 and sold more than a million copies, thrilling readers with scenes of fluid, mutating flesh and science out of control. Critically acclaimed, 27-year-old Sena was referred to as the Japanese Dean Koontz, though a better comparison might be with another author/doctor, Michael Crichton. Like Crichton, Sena sowed his novel with dressed-up facts and data, some based on his own research, which added weight to what was essentially a rollicking good schlock horror.

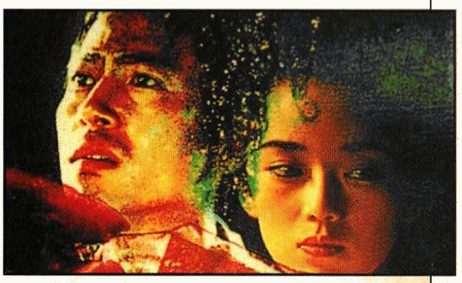
ORGAN MUSIC

Parasite Eve begins with the death of 25 year-old Kiyomi Nagashima. Distracted by a vision, she dies at the wheel of her car. Her husband, Doctor Toshiaki Nagashima, is working in the biomedical laboratory at R University when the call comes through that his wife has been in an accident. He rushes to the hospital, but by the time he gets there she is dead on the slab. Already exhibiting signs of Stage One mad-scientist obsession, he arranges with the transplant coordinators to remove her liver so that he "may keep part of her alive".

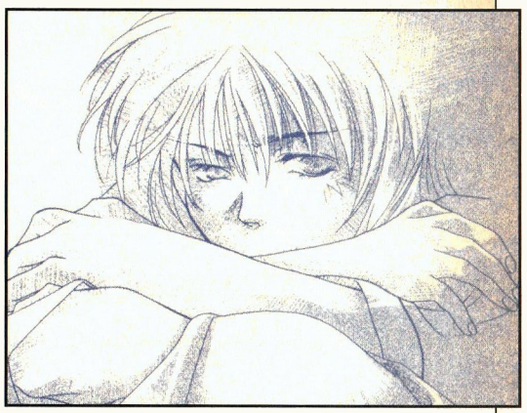
Meanwhile, Kiyomi's kidneys are being rushed to 14-year-old Mariko Anzai. Mariko had already recieved one kidney in an operation two years before. But 'Frankenstein' taunts at school had caused her to give up her medication, with the result that the kidney atrophied and had to be removed. Desperate to save Mariko, her father consents, against her will, to put her through the operation again.

Toshiaki, in his lab, is secretly cultivating the liver cells from his dead wife. His speciality is the mitochondria at the core of the cells, and he notices that a batch of these cells, codenamed Eve-One, are multiplying at a furious rate, which makes him excited. A university student, Sachiko Asakura, who is unwittingly helping his studies, becomes steadily more suspicious of his work. One night she is in the lab when she spots something slithering out from the sample storage; a part-formed body creeping up on her. It's Eve-One. Before she can escape it attacks and captures her.





A series of flashbacks establishes some strange connection between Kiyomi and the mitochondria in her cells. For some years, Kiyomi felt as if there was some force inside her, occasionally sending her visions or even hijacking her body. She tries to communicate her fears to her husband. Could the mitochondria in her body's cells have a mind of their own? Are they plotting to take over completely? Could they, she, Eve – this force has a personality of its own – be engineering Kiyomi's death as part of an escape plan?

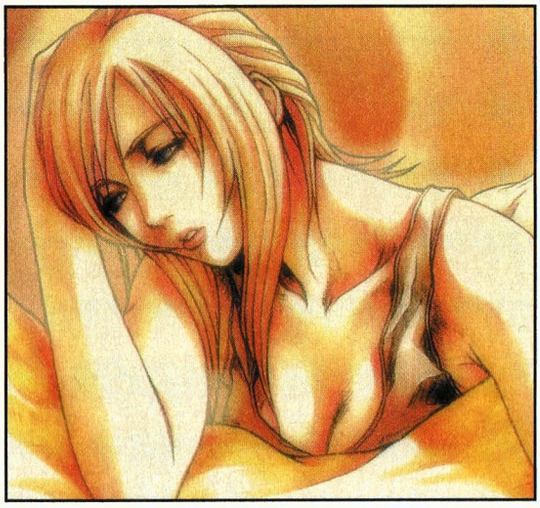


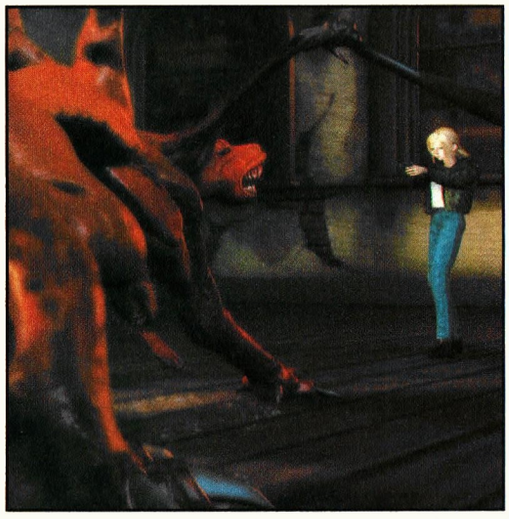
TOMORROW THE WORLD

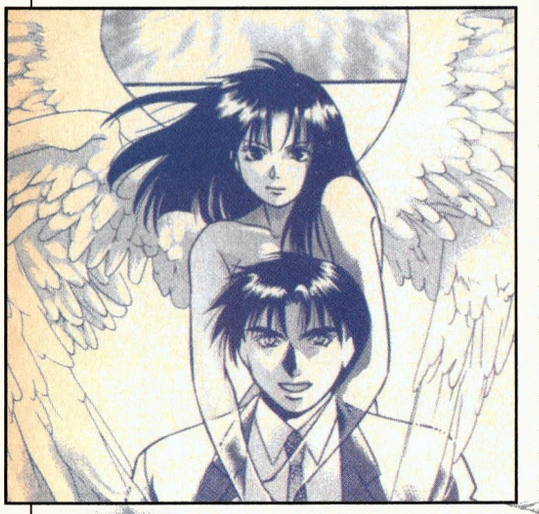
Student Asakura, possessed by Eve, turns up at the Japanese Biochemical seminar to make a presentation. Stepping up onto the podium she announces that she, Eve, the mitochondria and all their descendants are the next step in the evolution of life on the planet and that they will take over the world. When Toshiaki challenges Eve, she leaves her host body, almost immolating Asakura in the process.

パラサイト・イヴ

パラサイト・イヴ







Toshiaki, realising that some dreadful force has gotten loose, returns to his lab to destroy the remaining Eve cells. But Eve is already there, growing a fully-formed replica of Kiyomi's body as a temporary shell to inhabit. Eve/Kiyomi tries to seduce, then force, Toshiaki into making love. He can't resist. Regaining consciousness later, Toshiaki realises that the embryonic child of their union cannot be grown inside Eve's constructed version of Kiyomi. Eve needs a human mother to grow the baby; someone with matching tissue.

The target is Mariko, who since her transplant has been receiving visions from her kidney's donor, Eve/Kiyomi. Eve appears, deploying telekinetic powers to warp bone and tissue and explode the nurses who try to protect Mariko. Eve's body is already beginning to decay; she must impregnate Mariko quickly to create a viable child – her evolutionary successor.

The climax is one of those scenes the term Grand Guignol was invented for. Eve-One plants the embryo inside Mariko and then, her job done, unravels ecstatically in a pink cloud of flesh. Toshiaki arrives in time to witness Mariko giving birth, a wheezing baby appearing and rapidly growing into the form of an adult woman. This new Eve is ready to take over the world, but something goes wrong. Male mitochondria begin fighting female inside the new creature's body. At the conclusion, New Eve immolates herself and her father Toshiaki in an orgy of destruction. The novel finishes with a caution from Sena – we don't know why Kiyomi's mitochondria rebelled, but maybe one day it will happen again.

OTHER EVES

Thanks to the novel's success, it didn't take long for the spin-off bandwagon to kick into gear. A cheapo television movie version, adapted by Ryoichi Kimizuka and directed by Masayuki Ochiai (a director on the *Mystery Zone* series) was released in February 1997 and starred the strikingly unearthly, but utterly wooden, 'talent' Riona Hazuki as Eve/Kiyomi. The movie stank, and the CGI visual effects were distinctly underwhelming.

Far more success was enjoyed by Squaresoft's sub-RPG game adaptation for the Sony Playstation. The story was completely replotted by Square, with only the molten flesh and possession themes remaining. The heroine is Aya, a piece-packing New York cop who has to hunt down and destroy Eve after the mitochondrian revolution kicks off at an opera performance. The story was held together by pre-rendered sequences which successfully captured the horrifying transformation scenes.

Given the way in which the movie and game wandered off the path, it's no wonder that Sena insisted on hands-on involvement in the comics adaptation. A comics fan himself, he admitted that *Parasite Eve* was originally inspired by *Version*, a three-volume 1991 manga by the late Hisashi Sakaguchi. Sakaguchi's story is about a man who is searching for his missing father, and stumbles across a secret government project that has constructed an organic computer system. With shades of Dean Koontz's *Demon Seed*, this computer is more than just bundles of data-driving DNA and has a consciousness that attempts to transcend its physical limitations.

The *Parasite Eve* manga appeared in *ASUKA Fantasy DX* magazine from February to December 1997, with a script by Sena himself and art by a relative newcomer, Shikakuno, who had made a name for himself with his debut comic *Out of Standard*. The manga adaptation is essentially faithful to the novel, but condenses it radically and drops much of the classy (but wordy) techno-babbling. The resulting work reveals the story for the schlock it is, bolstered by some vague philosophic musing on the meaning of life. Artist Shikakuno has a very clean line that suits the clinical hospital setting, but his figures are stiff and his characters unsympathetic. His storytelling and layouts are odd as well. Liberal overuse of mid-shots and some curious choices of splash pages mean that he fails time and again to really punch home the more powerful and grotesque scenes. The result is a manga that could have been terrifying, but in the end is merely interesting. ●

With thanks to Akiko Tamamuro for her assistance.

パラサイト・イヴ

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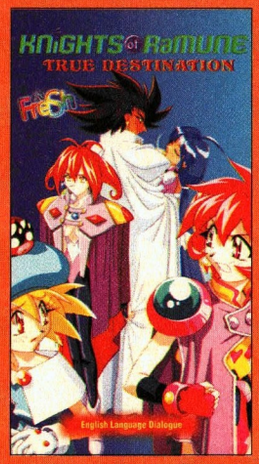

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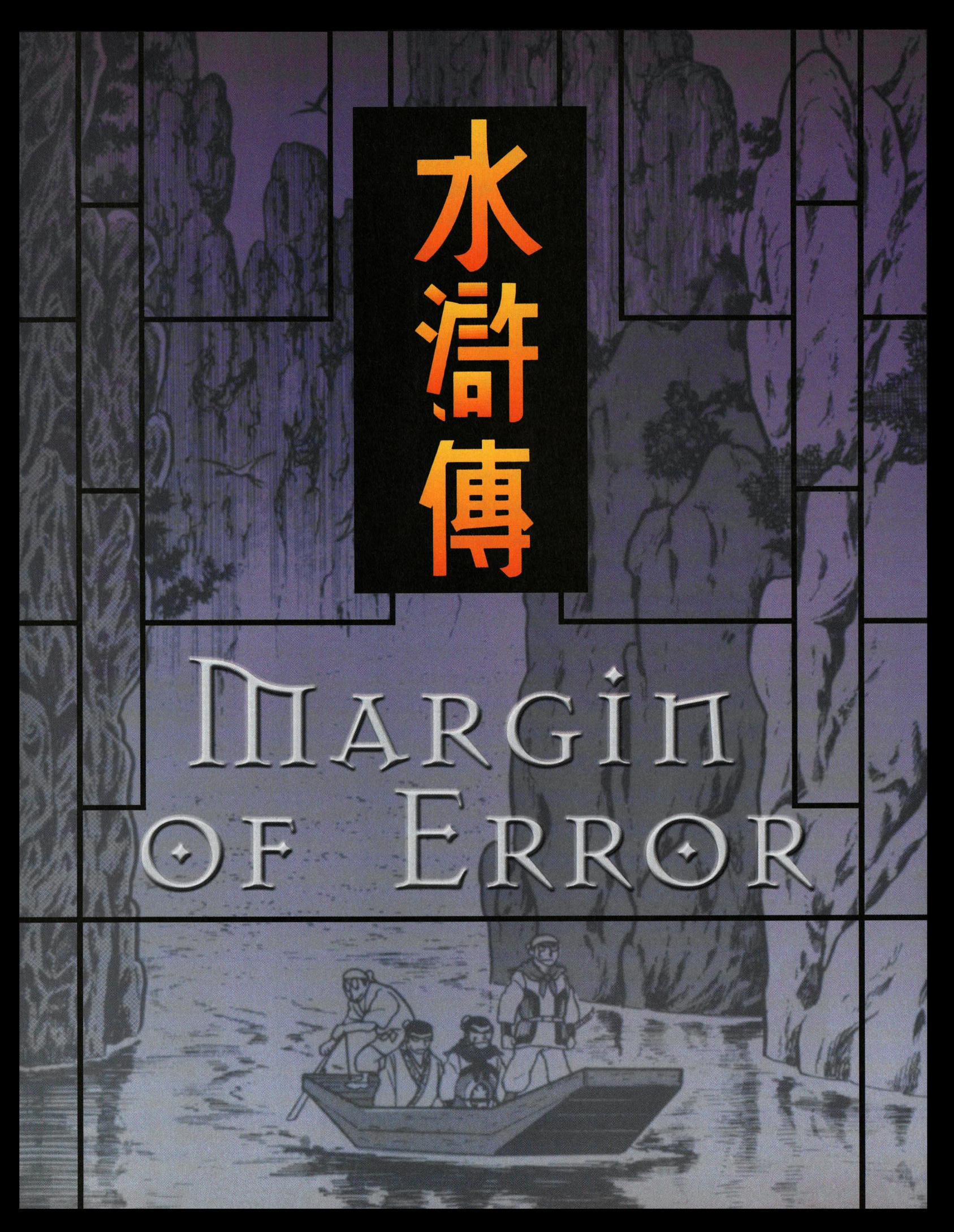
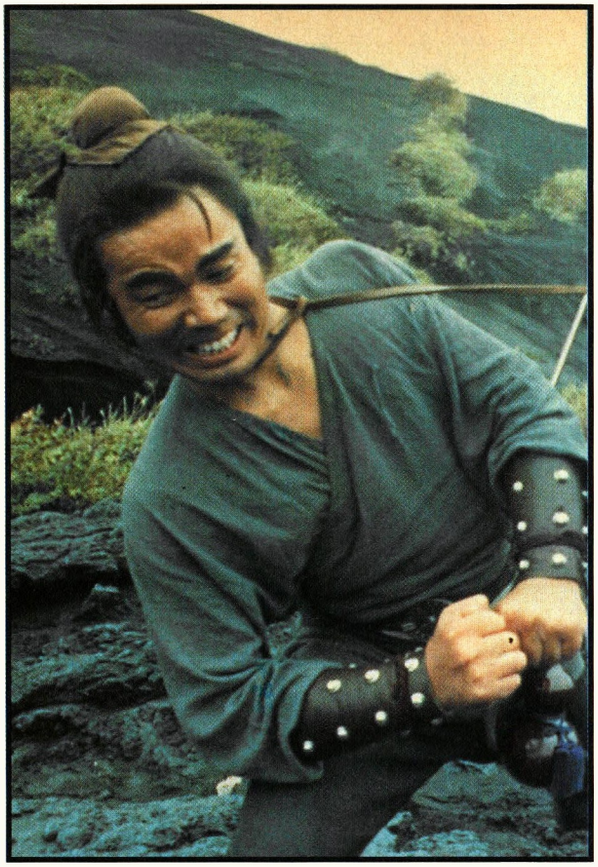

水滸傳
MARGIN
OF ERROR

Maybe you young whippersnappers don't remember it, or weren't lucky enough to live in the right country, but when I was a lad there was this great show on BBC television. *The Water Margin* it was called. It was an old Chinese legend, that much we knew, but close attention to the credits showed that it was made by a Japanese company, NTV. Much time has passed since then but I, and many others, still remember. The story concerned a group of heroes, from various walks of life, who were forced to become outlaws by the cruel and corrupt government of 12th century China. The exemplar of that cruelty and corruption was Kao Chiu, played superbly by Kei Sato (who also appeared in *Onibaba*, a movie you should sell several close relatives to get hold of). The main hero of the TV show was swordsman Lin Chung, forever gurning earnestly at the camera and soliloquising about the morality of politics and whether he was quite ready to kick some ass. There was also some spunky love interest in the shape of Hu Sanniang, the two-sword wielding one-woman Lin Chung fan club.

When I came to Japan, I was curious to see if it was remembered by Japanese people, especially as I occasionally spotted actors from the show on television. Imagine my surprise on discovering that no one I spoke to in Japan had ever heard of the show!

Strangely, everyone had heard of *Kogarashi Monjiro*, a *ronin* swordplay drama starring Atsuo Nakamura, the same actor that played Lin Chung. *Kogarashi Monjiro* is also well known in Hong Kong, as one of the *Fong Sai Yuk* movies features a deliberate parody of *Monjiro's* straw-chewing, wide-brim hatted hero. But *The Water Margin*? No.

While I didn't find the television show, I *did* discover a host of

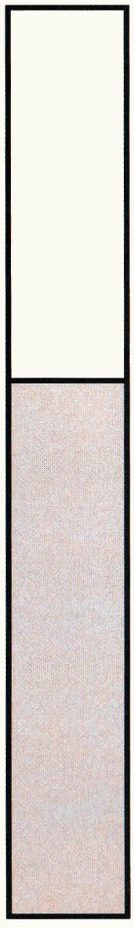


Do not despise the snake for having no horns, for who is to say it will not become a dragon? So may just one manga become a cult Seventies television show... *PAUL MASON* gets on the trail of the elusive *WATER MARGIN*.

other *Water Margin*-related trails. Perhaps the most important was the manga by Mitsuteru Yokoyama. After seeing the manga I went back to my videos (*The Water Margin* is available on laser disc and video from Fabulous Films), and discovered that the show was credited to a story by Shih Nai'an (misspelled 'Tai-an' in the television credits) and Yokoyama. So without knowing it, all those years ago we were watching a live-action adaptation of a manga!

Yokoyama is something of a legend. Everyone has their favourite candidate for the title of 'inventor of the Giant Robot genre', but a damn good case can be made for Yokoyama, with his *Ironman 28*. He was inspired to draw manga after seeing Osamu Tezuka's *Metropolis*, and went on to produce 229 works.

Published between 1969 and 1970 in *Kibo Life*, and subsequently reissued in eight small-format volumes, Yokoyama's *Water Margin* clearly follows the old-school Tezuka approach. Virtually everyone in the comic looks like a kid, which makes for a very different interpretation of Lin Chung! Despite this, like Tezuka,



> "**So without knowing** *it, all those years ago we were watching a live-action* **adaptation of a manga!**"

Yokoyama is prepared to insert non-childish ideas and themes into his work. The depredations of the villains are by no means underplayed, and there is an authentic savagery in places that would be hard to find in some more 'adult' manga. Thus, for example, Black Whirlwind Li Kuei tries to take his mother on a journey, leaves her while he looks for water, and returns to find her eaten by tigers. Revenge is bloody, with severed heads being offered to the spirits of fallen comrades.

The Tezuka comparisons are also evident in the composition of the comic which, while not crowded, contains more detail than the average contemporary *Shonen Jump* strip. The series of eight vol-

umes each contain between 220 and 300 pages, with the final volume being a '*gaiden*' or series of outtakes – stories that Yokoyama skipped on the way. Such an approach was inevitable, for the original story is pretty lengthy, and some shortening was necessary. Yokoyama was unable to give all 108 heroes the coverage they are given in the original novel (see sidebar for details), and in some cases conflates characters. This is taken to even greater extremes in the television show.

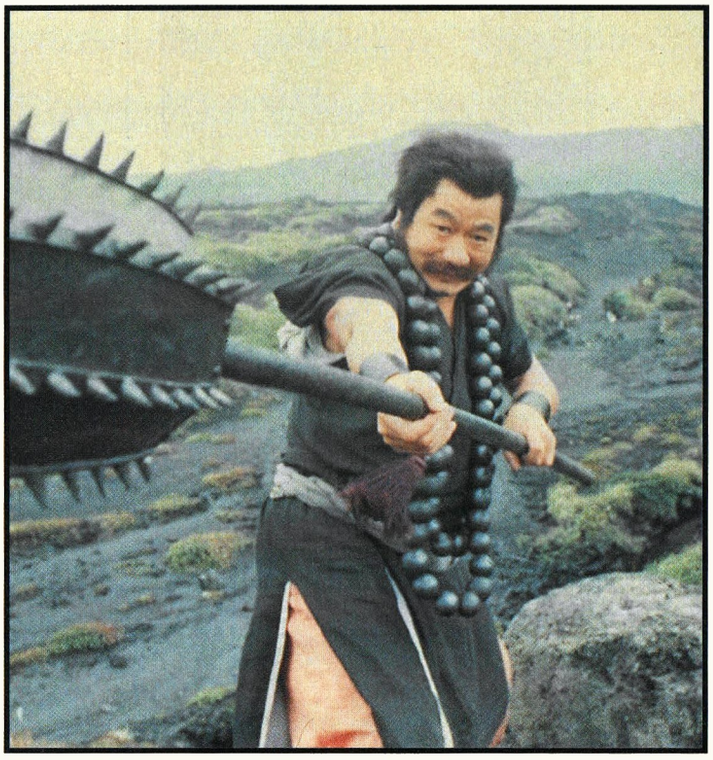
Although Yokoyama took a few liberties with the story, by and large he stuck to the text. The television show, on the other hand, was the recipient of a large dose of Japanese sensibility. Thus there's lots of rape and bondage in *The Water Margin*, and the focus is on heroic, sword-wielding Lin Chung. Yokoyama's *Water Margin* doesn't go so far as to include the cannibalism of the original, but nor does it introduce all the bondage and rape, and a spear-wielding Imperial Instructor Lin Chung is balanced by the focus on other major characters, such as Sung Chiang, who fit less easily into the Japanese *ronin* mould. Moreover Hu Sanniang is closer to the tough cookie of the original novel than the television show's puppy-dog good girl.

"This one was *published from 1988*, and really, *one wonders what* was the point."

Yokoyama's work is also pretty well researched, despite the simplifications. Costumes, uniforms and architecture, as well as customs, are fairly close to those of the period. This isn't always the case with another *Water Margin* manga, published by Kodansha, drawn by Kiyoshi Numata and written by Sentaro Kubota. This one was published from 1988, and really, one wonders what was the point. The art is not greatly dissimilar to Yokoyama's, merely more ungainly, and with more use of washes. The costumes are ridiculous in places, and even though it is slightly closer to the original story than Yokoyama's version, on almost every occasion where the original story has an interesting quirk, it has been ironed out to fit in with a rigid modern concept of what constitutes 'plot'.

Curiously, where Yokoyama ends with the Imperial Pardon by which the Liangshan Po heroes finally receive the recognition they deserve, Kubota has chosen to continue to the end of the long version, with most of the heroes dying, and Kao Chiu triumphant (though with a feeling of 'emptiness' which seems intended to make him seem almost a sympathetic character). Rather a contrast to the television show, in which Kao Chiu's arrogance and hatred for Lin Chung ends up being the death of him.

Comparison of the two comics highlights Yokoyama's empathy for his material. Despite its prodigious length, *Water Margin* can be considered one of Yokoyama's minor works – he went on to produce a legendary 60-volume adaptation of the other classic Chinese historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. There is a small but significant fan following based on this novel (which is believed to have been written by the man who edited *Water Margin*). Both feature highly complex, discursive narratives, and a truly astounding cast, though *Three Kingdoms* is more of a politics



HISTORY

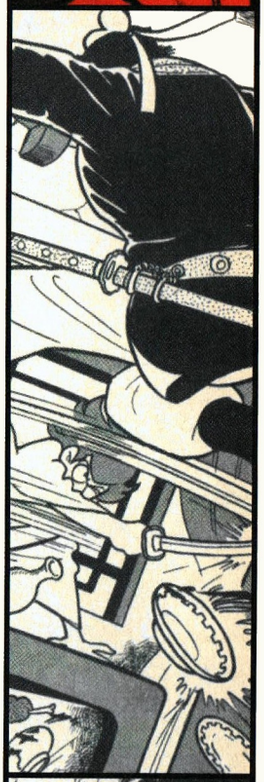
The story of the *Water Margin* (*Shuihuzhuan* in Chinese, *Suikoden* in Japanese) is like that of Robin Hood: it's based on fact, but has been embroidered so much that it's more legend than history. All the same, records from the Northern Sung Dynasty (960-1127 AD) do contain references to a rebellion in Shantung by 'Sung Chiang's 36' in the early years of the 12th century. Scholars argue about whether the 36 were leaders of a much larger band, or whether a mere 36 outlaws were sufficient to put the wind up the mighty Imperial Government (my money's on the former). Whichever it was, the rebellion came to an unceremonious end, though there is some evidence that Sung Chiang and his followers went on to work for the government.

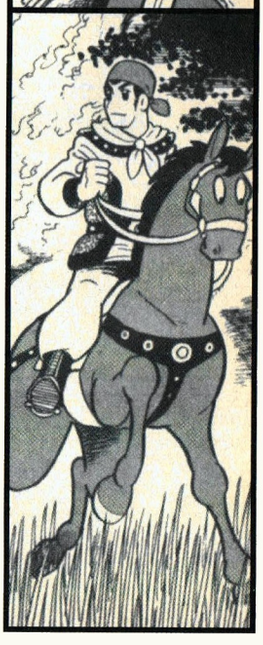
In the subsequent centuries, the bare facts of this uprising gradually attracted other stories, as storytellers and performers weaved their own versions, introduced new characters, or simply fused other stories into the burgeoning *Water Margin* myth. Names were gradually found for the whole 36. This wasn't enough for the creative types of the day, though. The 36 heroes were declared to be the human incarnations of heavenly spirits, and another 72 lower-ranking spirits were added. Thus by the time the story was set down in novel form by the shadowy figure Shih Nai'an some time in the 13th or 14th century, there were 108 heroes, each with distinctive traits and a flowery nickname.

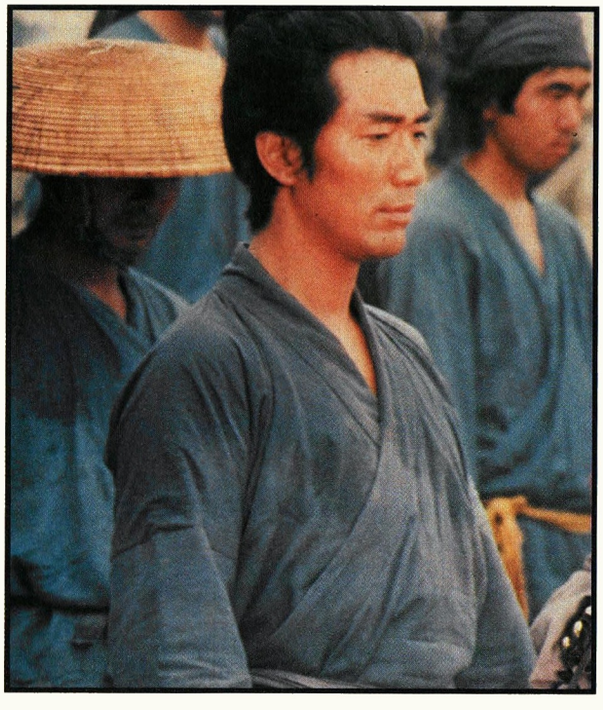
Although Sung Chiang was still probably the most prominent character, he was now rivalled by other larger-than-life heroes, like the Imperial Arms Instructor Lin Chung, the tiger killer Wu Sung, and the Blue-Faced Beast, Yang Chih. A strong supernatural strain had been introduced with a number of sorcerers, from the Taoist Kungsun Sheng, to the villainous Kao Lien.

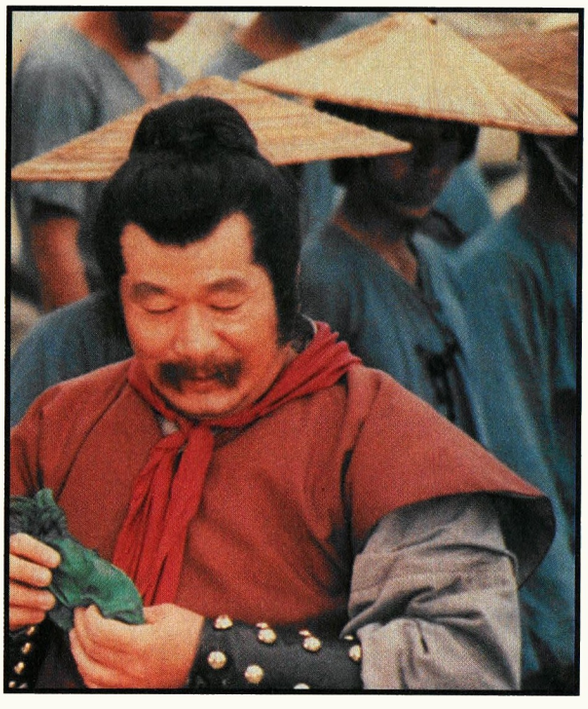
Like the legend of Robin Hood, *Water Margin* spawned a variety of revisions, spin-off stories (of how various heroes learned their martial arts at the Shaolin Monastery, for example) and even sequels. One of the biggest disagreements is over which version of the original story is 'right.' One of them ends with the 108 heroes gathered at Liangshan Po, and being sent a sign from Heaven to show that their cause is just. Another version includes more chapters, usually thought to have been written later in order to soften the revolutionary message. In these, the outlaws win a pardon from the Emperor, and turn their martial talents towards exterminating China's foes, both external and internal. However the heroes' old enemies in the Government still bear grudges, and one by one most of them die, whether in battle, by subterfuge, or by their own hand.

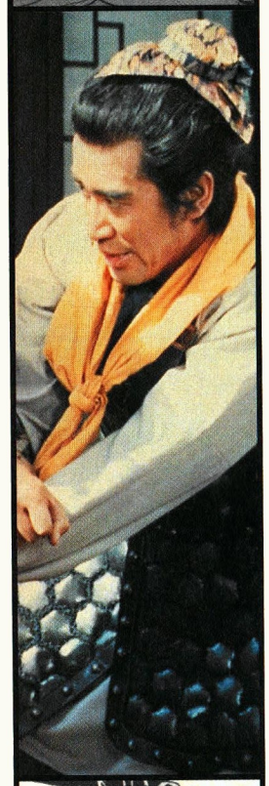
A recent survey in the People's Republic rated *Water Margin* one of the ten most influential and popular books in China. If you want to read the original novel, the standard translation is Sidney Shapiro's *Outlaws of the Marsh*, published in full in China, and in abridged form in the UK. A better version is to be had in the form of *The Marshes of Mount Liang*, a recent translation out of Hong Kong by John and Alex Dent-Young. Unfortunately the pair have so far only managed to produce the first two volumes, *The Broken Seals* and *The Tiger Killers*. ●











and war story. Every bookshop in Japan carries at least one *Three Kingdoms*-related work, possibly a dictionary of characters.

At the start of the Eighties, NHK broadcast a glorious puppet adaptation of the story, which married the skills of *bunraku* to manga narrative technique: interestingly it was as a result of this show that many current *Three Kingdoms* fans got into Yokoyama's manga.

There's a saying in China: 'Don't let youngsters read *Water Margin*, don't let oldsters read *Three Kingdoms*'. Where the former is dangerous for its revolutionary sentiment and savagery, the latter contains Machiavellian intrigue and provides a pointed insight into statecraft. While it's plain that as far as Japan's fans are concerned, *Three Kingdoms* is top dog (dog being the favourite food of Chinese heroes), *Water Margin* has inspired plenty of other works. There was a sub-*Street Fighter* arcade game, but you may be more familiar with the Konami game *Demon Century Suikoden*, which is based loosely on *Water Margin* characters. It spawned an anime whose translators at AD Vision, sadly, were not familiar with *Water Margin*...

"There's a saying in China: *'Don't let youngsters read* ***Water Margin,*** *don't let oldsters read* ***Three Kingdoms'*** **"**

A more cerebral approach to *Water Margin* gaming can be had from Koei, producers of the highly successful *Nobunaga's Ambition* strategy game. Many years ago they released a *Water Margin* strategy game (sold by Koei US as *Bandit Kings of Ancient China*), though sadly it failed to interpret the story very well, being more of a game about conquering China region by region than a heroic struggle against corrupt bureaucrats. More recently, they've produced an updated edition that sets the record straight a little, though there are no current plans for an English version.

The name appears elsewhere, too. Among the mass of *yakuza* movies there are *Gokudō Suikodens* which, despite the name, owe relatively little to the original. Visit Yokohama Chinatown and you'll find that every lamp post has a picture of one of the *Water Margin* heroes. There's even a chain of drinking restaurants called *Suikoden* (though in a cunning *kanji* pun, it means

'Drunken Tiger' rather than 'Water Margin'). Most bizarre, for me, was the fate of Lin Chung. Atsuo Nakamura stood for the Japanese Diet as an independent candidate (though supported by the *Sakigake* party). He was elected, and so, for me, Lin Chung has now become Kao Chiu...

Of course China is the true home of the story. I can only skim the surface of the vast industry of *Water Margin*-related entertainment, including a theme park in Singapore (there's a *Three Kingdoms* one as well). There is an old (and to be honest, rather odd) *Water Margin* kung fu movie from way back, but you're probably more likely to be able to find the Tsui Hark *All Men Are Brothers: Blood of the Leopard*, starring Tony Leung Kar-Fai as Lin Chung, and the ubiquitous Joey Wong as his wife. Though prone to the usual excesses, it's an interesting movie, especially in the male bonding between Lin Chung and Flower Priest Lu Da. Its success in an English-language environment really depends on it being translated by someone with a bit of talent and care. Also, the People's Republic of China produced a rather spectacular *Water Margin* television series ten years back. It has a typically modern slant, focusing on the revolutionary message, and portraying the traditional leader, Sung Chiang, as something of a sell-out for accepting the Emperor's Pardon.

It's strange to think that a Japanese television show that was a part of so many Britons' childhood languishes almost unremembered in its country of origin. Yet I was reassured to find, eventually, that there are still dedicated Japanese *Water Margin* fans out there. Perhaps, just maybe, there are at least 108 of them... ●

***Water Margin* is available on video from Fabulous Films, who also plan to release it on DVD sometime in the autumn.**
To sample Paul Mason's *Water Margin* RPG, swing by http://www.firedrake.org/panurge.

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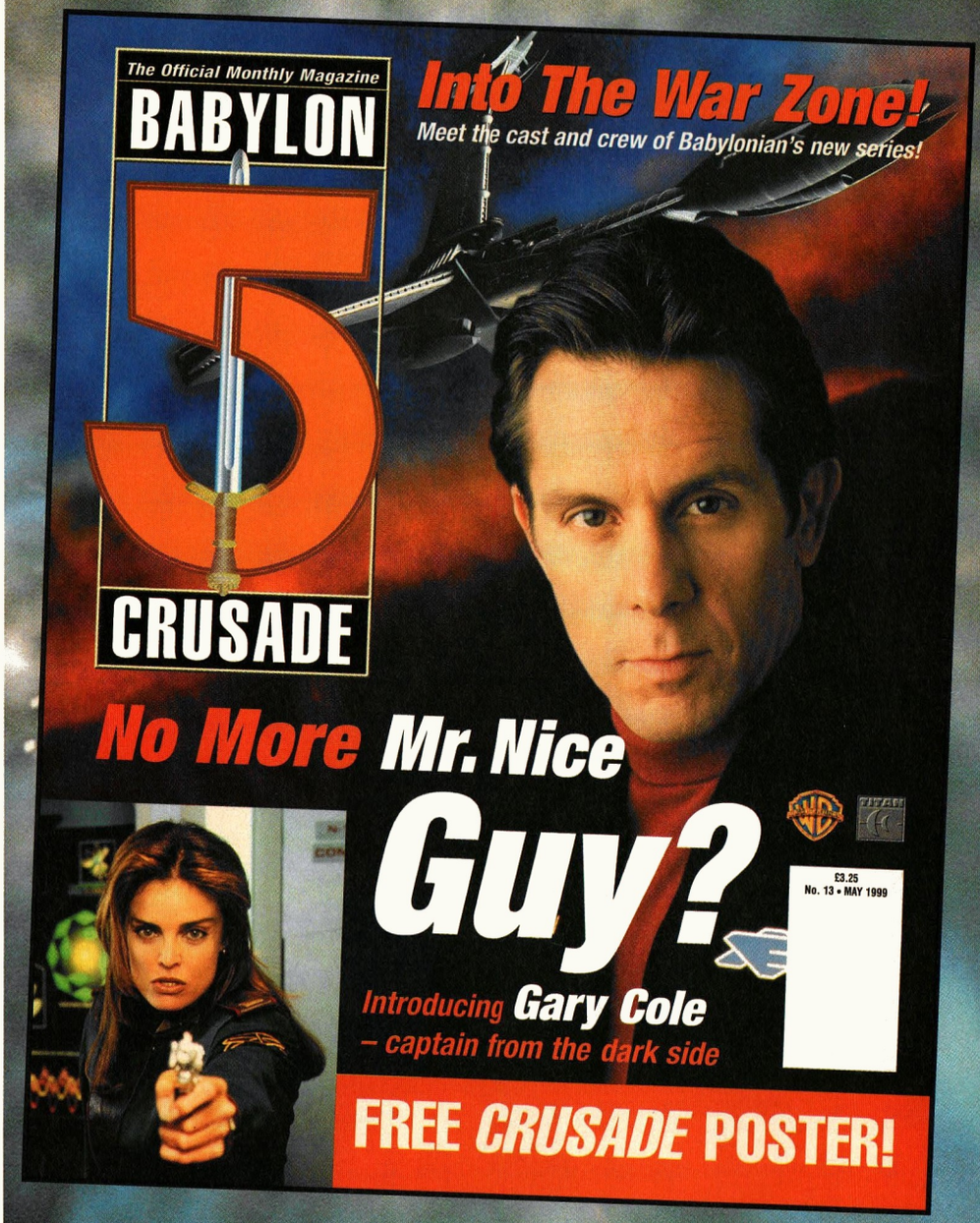
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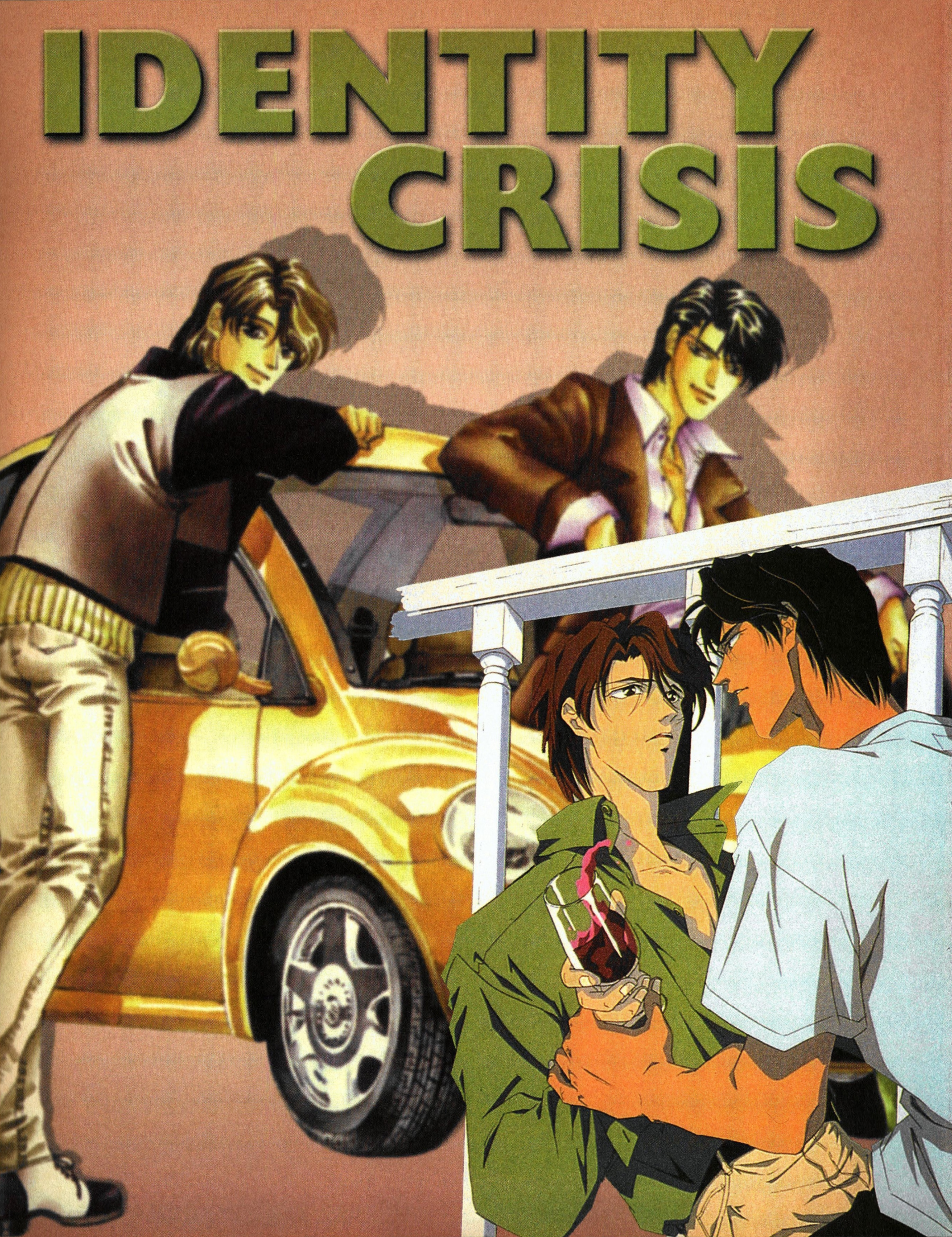

IDENTITY
CRISIS

Lethal Weapon for the Village People? A detective show? A love comedy? *Fake* doesn't know what it is. CATHY STERLING asks what went wrong.

Dee is a tough, streetwise New York detective who never plays by the book, but always gets his man. Ryo is a young, shy investigator who lucked into Dee as a partner when he transferred to the 27th Precinct. That was some time ago. Now the two have become firm friends and an excellent team – perhaps opposites do attract after all. But one of them's gay and the other is straight, and never the twain shall meet...

WAITING FOR THE MEN

The Western release of *Fake* has been a long time coming. Not that you'd know, since it's barely a year since the video first hit Japanese shelves – a 12-month wait from Japan to US is not uncommon. But before its Japanese release, *Fake* languished in the vaults for two whole years. Someone, somewhere was sitting on it, but why?

Is *Fake* an anime hot potato? Apparently not in the US market, where Anime Works have been cheerfully advertising it as a variant on *Lethal Weapon*, but with a Mel Gibson character who's gay instead of mad. And surely it can't be an issue in Japan, where Sanami Mato's manga serial in *Be-Boy* magazine is still a fan favourite. The video production of *Fake* boasts some truly excellent voice work from some of Japan's finest including Tomokazu Seki (*Escaflowné's* Vern Farnel) in an assured performance as Dee, and Tetsuya Iwanaga (*El Hazard's* Makoto) as JJ. These two previously sparred with each other in *Evangelion*, when they played Shinji's fair-weather friends Toji and Kensuke. It even has a theme song by the chart-topping female pop duo Kix-S, who are conveniently as camp as a row of pink tents.

JUST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

So it's got big names, a big production and a faithful following, but *Fake*'s problems seem to stem from an identity crisis among the producers, who can't have agreed on the target audience. As the *Erotic Anime Movie Guide* points out, gay manga are aimed at female viewers in Japan, who share their Western teen counterparts' interest in sexually-unthreatening boys who live in a world devoid of female competition.

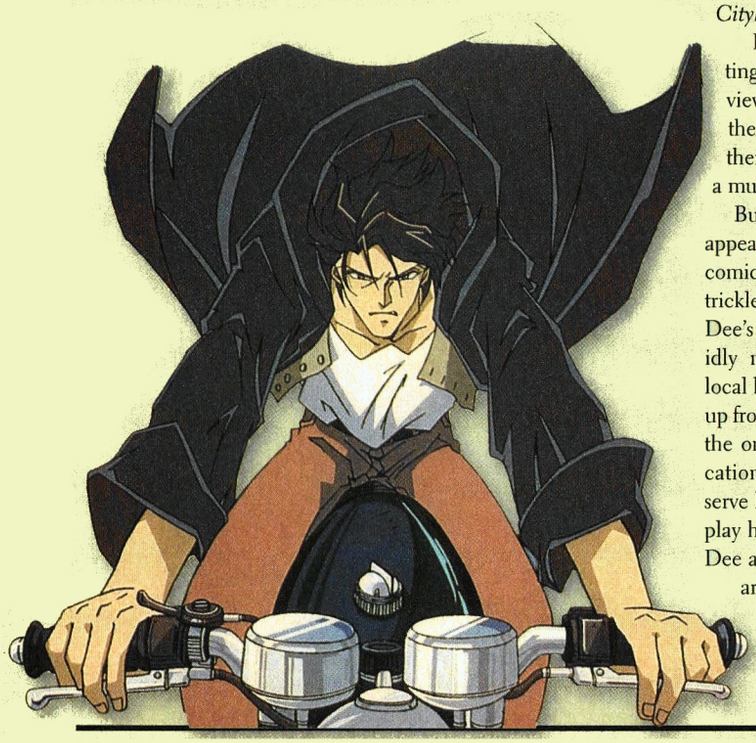
However, female manga readers are less likely than boys to be avid consumers of video versions of their heroes' adventures. This can be a problem in the straight-to-video market, particularly for shows based on manga. True, some video releases are there to test the waters, as the next step after radio dramatisation but before television broadcast, as another tentative step to try a show's legs in the open market. But many video releases like *Fake* are less designed as dry-runs for television than they are to promote the original manga. Long-running comic serials like *Jojo's Bizarre Adventures* take up a lot of space on bookshop shelves, and the lucky ones will get an occasional video tie-in to lure new readers into buying early volumes, and even tempt one-time fans to return.

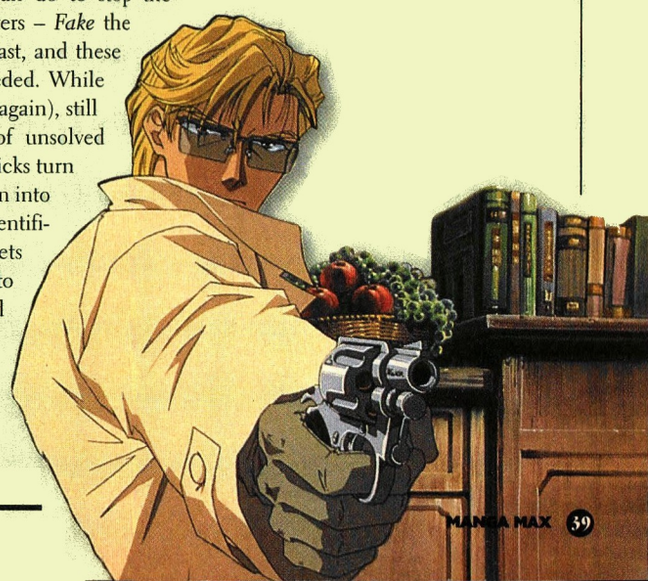
FIVE GO MAD IN ENGLAND

Jumping in halfway through a long-running series is likely to put anyone off, and so the trick is always to place the characters in such a situation that the audience can become acquainted with them one at a time. So far, so good, because the screenwriter hired for the project was Akinori Endo, whose many credits include the *Kindaichi Case Files* films and many of the *Cityhunter* stories.

Endo's script takes a common fish-out-of-water tactic, putting the two leads in an alien situation so the new, unfamiliar viewers can identify with their confusion. Instead of keeping them on the beat in their New York hometown, Endo sends them off on holiday in England, where they are dragged into a murder mystery at an isolated hotel.

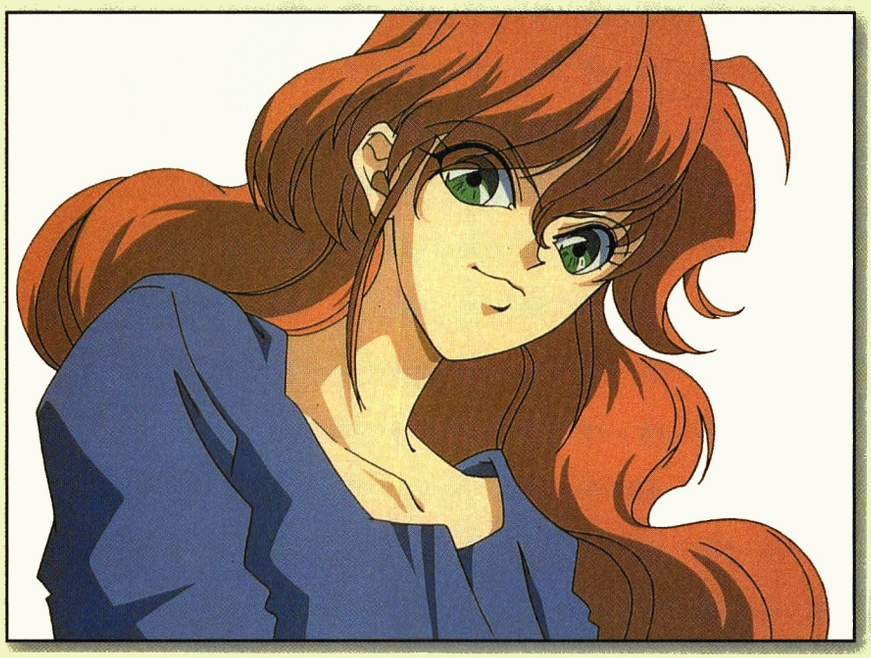
But there's nothing Endo can do to stop the appearance of the other characters – *Fake* the comic has a whole supporting cast, and these trickle in when they're least needed. While Dee's busy trying to charm Ryo (again), still idly mulling over the details of unsolved local killings, their teenage sidekicks turn up from New York. Clearly thrown into the original comic for reader identification, these two jolly moppets serve little other purpose except to play happy families with Ryo and Dee as mummy and daddy. The arrival of the children turns what could have been a queer case of Agatha Christie into a rather





Agatha Christie into a rather pointless holiday farce, with much swapping of rooms and indoor roller-blading – because it's raining outside.

Before you can say 'bloody kids', another New York cop turns up on the scene. As if the razor-sharp spectacles and blonde quiff weren't enough to mark him out as the archetypal Older Man figure, he introduces himself as Berkeley Rose, a strangely attractive avuncular type whose role in the show is, once again, utterly superfluous, but will mean something to those who have read further ahead in the comic. He is destined to become the boys' boss back home, so might as well get thrown into the mix now. England's weirdest hotel can now not only boast legions of



Japanese tourists getting regularly murdered, but also the UK's biggest concentration of New York cops on vacation.

Which means of course, poor Endo has to cram in yet another new arrival, JJ, the camp New Yorker who worships the ground that Dee walks on. Naturally, Dee isn't interested because he only has eyes for Ryo – a bit of comedy business that might make for some interesting set-ups in the story proper, but only serves to delay the end by an unnecessary five minutes.

Ryo and Dee have a child's interest in detection, influenced more by the *Famous Five* than *Inspector Morse*. For them, solving a case involves gossiping for a while and waiting for the criminals to reveal themselves. Without giving anything away, the murder case in the *Fake* video would have been solved by a *real* police procedural in roughly ten seconds.

So detection and murder mystery is plainly not the raison d'être of the *Fake* franchise, which leaves the gay comedy elements. Director Akira Suzuki seems ideally chosen for this confused show, since he has not only helmed the gritty detective thriller *Domain of Murder* (also from an Endo script), but also madcap comedy capers like *Slayers* and *Maze*. But Suzuki seems unsure of how to handle his leads. At irregular intervals, Dee simply tries to get off with Ryo, with a failure rate in inverse proportion to the amount his prey has had to drink.

YOU THINK YOU'RE A MAN

Ryo, the straight man, is actually the slightly effeminate member of the team, who seems to spend a lot of time fretting and fussing over the children, the cooking and the cleaning. Put simply, Ryo is a stereotypical female character whose role has been reassigned to a man. Dee, the gay one, is a butch, macho Hollywood hero – the only thing that identifies him as homosexual is the fact he keeps trying to get into Ryo's pants.

With a protagonist who is everything a Hollywood hero should be except straight, and a lily-livered pansy as a sidekick, it's perhaps not surprising that Suzuki plays the entire farce exactly as if Ryo were a woman. He gets to be an intuitive sidekick, a maternal figure, an unattainable romantic prize, and, as the show rushes to an insane conclusion, even a damsel in distress.

But by this time, the *Fake* train has gone seriously off the rails. Not content with murder and comedy, the script throws in a gratuitous ghost story and a blithe spirit who gets involved in the action too. As if there weren't enough people sitting around twiddling their thumbs.

FAKING IT

But ultimately, the *Fake* anime is interesting enough to pique my interest in the original. Is it as muddled as this, or does the larger page-count give the characters room to breathe? Is there anything more to Dee and Ryo's relationship than endless abortive seductions? Do the children serve any purpose whatsoever? And once JJ and Berkeley Rose arrive, does Dee's homosexuality become of greater relevance to the plot?

That, in a way, is good news. Were I Japanese, a viewing of the anime would have sent me scurrying off to my local comic store to nab a copy of the manga wrapped tastefully in brown paper. But since I'm not, and the *Fake* manga remains untranslated, the video release doesn't do very much for me.

As in the *Lethal Weapon* movies that inspired it, *Fake* often walks an uneasy line between comedy and tragedy. A bit of cop-on-cop banter fits fine with mayhem and chaos, but not when people are watching their friends die from multiple stab wounds. As one might expect from a story with its pedigree, *Fake* ultimately has too many characters and too little time. As a murder mystery, it is completely unmysterious. As a romantic farce, it is quite mundane in spite of the sexual preferences of the protagonist. And as a gay anime, if I said the characters' sexuality made any real difference to the story, I'd be faking it. ●

Fake is released on video in the US by Anime Works.

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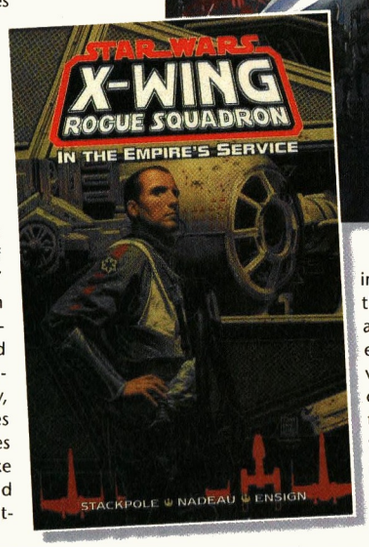
STAR WARS IS HERE!

Next month sees the opening of ***Star Wars:* Episode I *The Phantom Menace***, but the fun starts early with Titan as we release a slew of new titles set in that galaxy far, far away…

First up, there's ***Star Wars: X-Wing Rogue Squadron – In the Empire's Service***, another graphic novel in our growing *Star Wars* range. Set shortly after *Return of the Jedi*, the story sees Rogue Squadron facing a threat from one of the last strongholds of the Empire. Mounting an attack on the Imperial troops on Brentaal seems a tough enough job, but there's even more to the mission than meets the eye.

***Star Wars Magazine* #21** features yet more interviews with the stars of Episode I, and it's Ladies' Night this time round. Firstly, Pernilla August, who plays Shmi Skywalker, mother to Anakin, talks about her role in the new film. If you've seen the trailer for Episode I, you can't have failed to be impressed by the astonishing Queen Amidala. Natalie Portman chats about what it's like playing the Queen of a planet at the centre of Senator Palpatine's plans to create a new empire. But will she reveal the thing we all want to know – is that her real hair?

The first issue of our stunning new ***Star Wars Comic*** features the first part of the comic strip adaptation of Episode I, plus a special prelude strip which reveals even more secrets from the *Star Wars* universe. In the future, the *Star Wars Comic* will feature more exciting strips, telling stories from all corners of the galaxy featuring a host of characters, both old favourites and new friends. This first issue features a great free gift!



And then there's the ***Star Wars:* Episode I *The Phantom Menace Souvenir Magazine***, available later this month. This 96-page collectors' edition features the whole story of the making of the film, from George Lucas' hand-written script right through to Industrial Light & Magic's revolutionary computer-generated visual effects. As well as a photo-packed retelling of the film's story, this sumptuous tome also includes character profiles and biographies of all the actors (from little Jake Lloyd, through Brit-flick legend Ewan McGregor, to Shaft-in-waiting Samuel L. Jackson); exclusive behind-the-scenes photos, concept art, sketches and storyboards; interviews with set designers, creature effects artists, model makers, visual effects staff and other key crewmembers; and an overview of the merchandise about to hit the world's toyshops. As a guide to the film, you're not going to find anything more comprehensive, entertaining or essential. ●

A BRACE OF BATMEN

Titan Books release a couple of new *Batman* titles this month – so dust off your capes and cowls, and come join the fun. In ***Batman: Cataclysm***, a huge earthquake rocks Gotham City and Batman's world quite literally begins to fall apart. The Batcave is destroyed, the city lies in ruins and the inmates of Arkham Asylum for the Criminally Insane are on the loose. Who is behind the mysterious quake, and can even Batman stand against him?

Look out also for the paperback edition of ***Batman Animated***, Titan's big-selling look at the making of the superb *Batman* cartoons. The hardback edition (now *completely* sold out!) garnered such bouquets as 'an undeniable masterpiece' (*SFX*) and 'essential for *Batman* fans' (*Empire*), and no brickbats whatsoever! This big, fat, glossy book features page after page of gorgeous pictures from every stage of development of the cartoon, early design sketches for the series, character designs, storyboards and previously unseen pre-production work. The accompanying text charts the evolution of the show and includes details on every main character and the star voice-artists who bring them to life (including such luminaries as Mark 'Luke Sykwalker' Hamill and Roddy McDowell from *Four Weddings and a Funeral*… Sorry, I mean *Planet of the Apes*).●

OUT THIS MONTH...

MAGAZINES

❑ **THE X-FILES MONTHLY #41** Features interviews with horror writer Stephen King and *Kolchak* star Darren McGavin, where both talk about their work on *The X-Files*. Plus an in-depth chat with writer/producer John Shiban on the new direction of the show, a brand new comic strip mystery, and a free poster! £3.25 / On sale now.

❑ **STAR TREK MONTHLY #54** As the excitement mounts with the impending end of *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, this issue celebrates seven years of the series which took the *Star Trek* franchise in a bold new direction and bids a fond farewell to the show. Featuring interviews with the stars and behind-the-scenes personnel, and an exclusive report from the set of the series two-hour finale. 100pp / £4.99 / On sale 11 June. (*On sale in UK, Eire, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand.*)

❑ **SIMPSONS COMICS #29** Prepare yourselves and your loved ones for Homer Simpson the wrestling superstar! It's a true clash of the cretins as Homer takes on the guise of… Captain Slamtastic! What evil scheme is Mr Burns thinking up now? Plus more adventures of Bartman! £2.00 / On sale 17 June.

❑ **BABYLON 5 MAGAZINE #14** This issue's double interview features Edward and Peter Woodward, a chat with father and son, direct from the set of the *Babylon 5* follow-up series *Crusade*. Plus, there's an interview with *Crusade*'s man of mystery IPX consultant Max Eilerson, a.k.a. actor David Allen Brooks. £3.25 / Ships 24 June. (*On sale in UK, Eire, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.*)

❑ **MANGA MAX #8** Japanese shenanigans aplenty, as the latest issue dips a nervous toe into *The Water Margin*, cocks an ear at the Manchester beat combo Boa who have a Japanese record contract, and dons slippers and pipe for a look at some excellent manga for the over-Forties (it had me more gripped than Tiffany's funeral in *EastEnders*, and that's no lie!). £3.25 / Ships 24 June. (*On sale world-wide.*)

❑ **STAR WARS COMIC #1** £1.25 / On sale soon. See feature.

❑ **STAR WARS: EPISODE I THE PHANTOM MENACE SOUVENIR MAGAZINE** £3.25 / On sale 25 June. See feature.

❑ **STAR WARS MAGAZINE #21** £3.25 / Ships 28 June. See feature.

BOOKS

❑ **BATMAN ANIMATED** 144pp / paperback / £19.99 / On sale 18 June. See feature.

❑ **BATMAN: CATACLYSM** 320pp / paperback / £12.99 / On sale 18 June. See feature.

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FAN Scene

Bruce Lewis and Cathy Sterling are talking about their generation. Julia Sertori checks out naughty nurses, & Kevin Lillard places a long-distance call from Animazement. Irresponsible pictures by Andy Hepworth.

COME ALIVE!

YOU'RE IN THE ANIME GENERATION

It's one of the most common questions in the anime hobby: when did you get into this stuff? Although anime has been around for decades, the perception of anime as a distinct entity only dates back a bare few years. Sure, there once was an advantage to being a longtime fan – you had to have connections to get the stuff, *maan* – but in today's world of corner-shop anime even the new kids can get the latest thing right away.

Splitting anime up decade by decade is an arbitrary way of looking at the world, but it does throw a few important facts into perspective. Not the least is that it's not anime that has changed over the years so much as us. Technology has played an important part in the way the world receives anime. Before video recorders, you could only get anime through the mass market via a film distributor or a television channel. And if they thought cartoons were for kids, that's what they gave you. Video didn't just allow fans to record and replay their faves, passing tapes around to build interest, it also allowed US fans access to Japanese originals. Video also allowed distribution to bypass the standard methods. Now it was possible to pick a film up off a shelf in a shop: you didn't have to wait with your fingers crossed for your local cinema to go mad and play it for you.

There are an infinite number of ways to tally up our ever-growing community of anime lovers, so the classifications listed below are necessarily subjective. Be that as it may, there do exist generations of anime hobbyists – five arbitrary yet distinct divisions within the anime fancy based on when folks first became hooked on big eyes and speedlines.

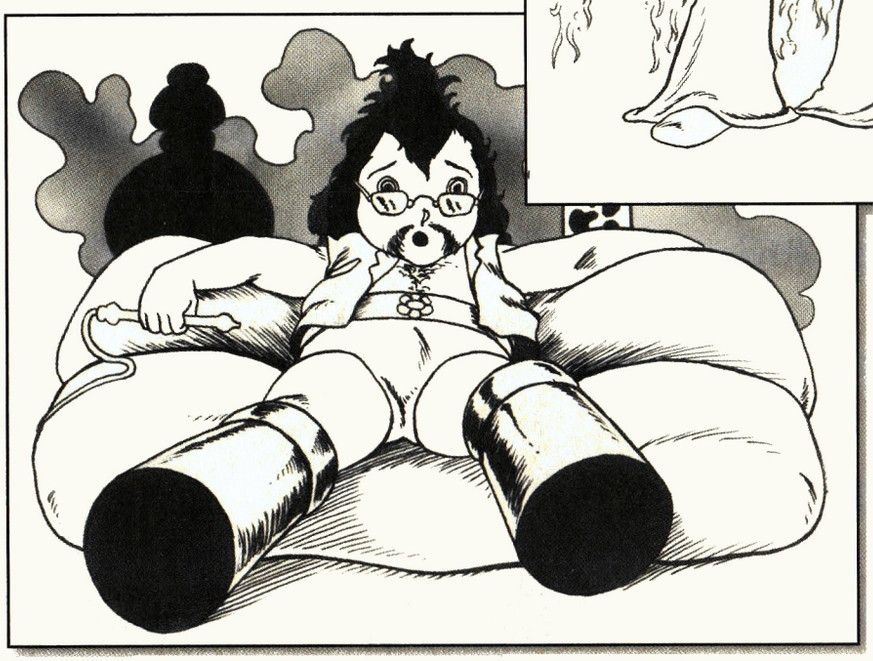
If you want your fanzine to be dangled in front of thousands of anime fans all over the world, you could do worse than send a copy to *Manga Max*, Titan Magazines, 42-44 Dolben Street, London, SE1 0UP, UK.

1: The Astro Boy Generation (pre-1967)

This is the original generation of anime fan: people who grew up with the Fred Ladd shows such as *Astro Boy*, *Gigantor*, and *Kimba the White Lion*. Along with others not as widely seen like *Prince Planet* and *Wonder Three*, their viewership and merchandising dollars brough the original wave of Japanese animation to North American television screens. Now enjoying the growth of the hobby from the comfort of their well-padded *La-Z-Boy* living rooms, anime's first fandom can bask in the glow of a growing interest.

Technological Innovation: Colour Television
Most likely to say: Look at the colours, man...!
Least likely to say: 'Sup homes. Anime is, like, da *bomb*. Go *Riki-Oh*.

THE OLD TIMERS



ASTRO BOY GENERATION

THE YAMATO GENERATION

2: The Old Timers (1967 -1977)

These guys grew up with such afternoon television staples as *Speed Racer* and *Eighth Man*, plus later faves like *Battle of the Planets*. Drawing on their youthful experience in *Star Trek* fandom, they built the first anime fan clubs in the Eighties, complete with bitter rivalries and fan wars. These seasoned anime-philes remember a time when home video decks didn't exist, let alone subtitled DVDs, and often scoff at the pampered modern anime fan. Kids today! When I was their age, we watched 45th-gen copies of *Steel Jeeg* on my granpa's black-and-white Philco... and we liked it!

Technological Innovation: Video Cassette Recorder
Most likely to say: Come back to my place and watch *Minky Momo*?
Least likely to say: How can you fight alien galaxies *beyond* space?

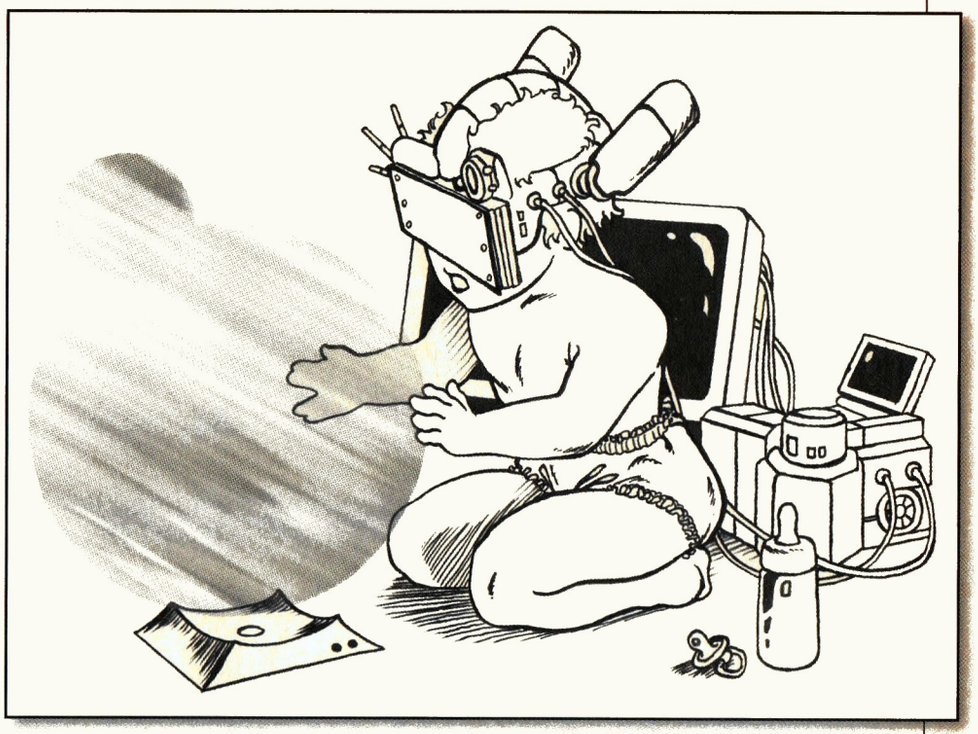
THE AKIRA GENERATION

3: The Yamato Generation (1977-1987)

These are the folks responsible for much of what we know today as anime fandom. This *I Ran Home From School To Watch Star Blazers* generation created the nationwide networks of fansubbers and letter-writers that laid the groundwork for the anime industry of today. They also cooked up the idea of an anime-only con – the first, Project A-Kon, debuted in 1989. A subset of this group, the so-called *Robotech* Generation, introduced anime themes into the RPG and computer industries in the late Eighties.

Technological Innovation: Subtitling Software
Most likely to say: Something incomprehensible, with the translation printed underneath.
Least likely to say: All the plot ideas for *Star Trek: NextGen* are completely original.

OTAKU GENERATION



4: The Akira Generation (1987-1997)

The last gasp of anime as a mere cult, these video-reared fans are responsible for breaking anime out of the ghetto and bringing it to hip audiences. Splashy and vivacious, the *Akira* generation is responsible for the sales numbers behind anime today, but often exhibits an unfortunate predilection for the tits, gun and tentacle-rape titles. Members currently run most of the anime conventions and companies in the US, and account for most of the staff of *Manga Max*.

Technological Innovation: DVD
Most likely to say: I'm gonna ****ing **** you! You ****ing ****er!
Least likely to say: Gracious me, how I miss those pleasant romantic comedies.

5: Otaku Nation (TODAY)

As the millennium approaches, bringing with it direct-broadcast satellites, MP3, and God knows what else, a new generation of cross-cultural anime fans has risen to take anime into the future. These Playstation-loving, fan-dubbing, costume-wearing Newtypes have never known a world without readily available anime. To them (and the rest of us) anime is now just another option on the infinite pull-down menu of global entertainment. Whatever anime becomes post-2001 is your doing. Yes, you. Get on with it.

Technological Innovation: Digital Television?
Most likely to say: Who cares if it's *really* a motion picture? It's *Tekken*!
Least likely to say: What's that in ECUs? ●

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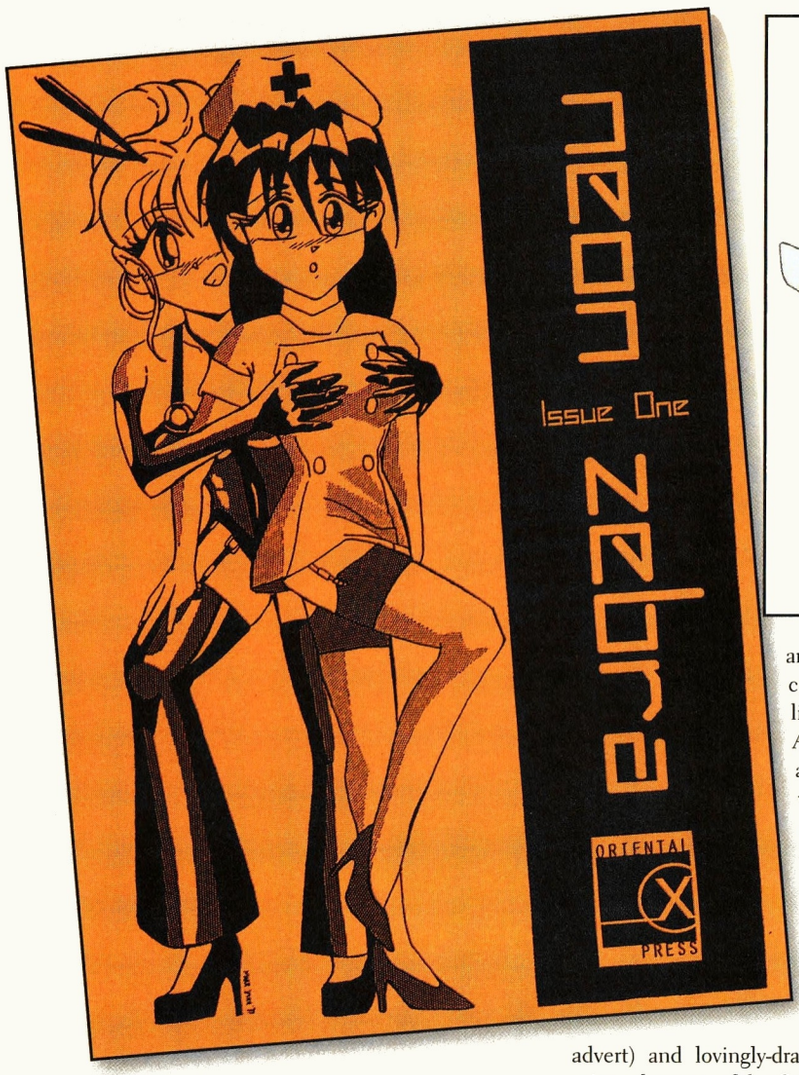
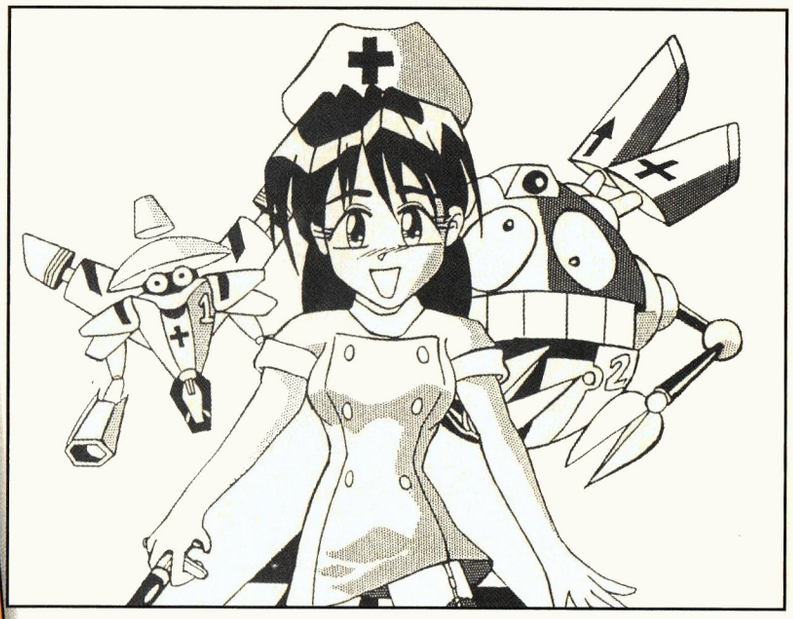
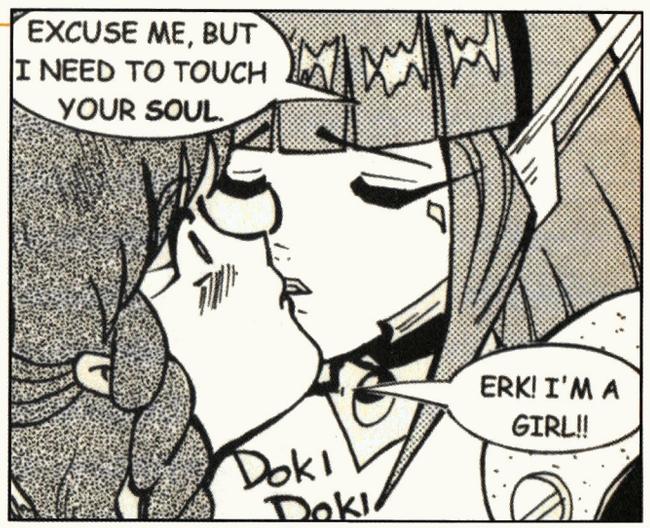




Neon Zebra consists of two funny shorts from writer/artist Mark Smith. Smith's work, despite his humble claims to the contrary, demonstrates an exuberant confidence – his lines are bold and sweeping, and the manic energy of his creations gives them a real life of their own. *Medilab Alpha* is a sketch of life on a wacky space hospital, where ditzy mini-skirted nurses bodge operations on lovestruck patients, and the ward inspector turns out to be a slinky bondage queen. *Medilab Alpha* is a strip of punchy one-liners ('Break a leg, not the bank!' says the spoof advert) and lovingly-drawn nursie cheesecake. It mixes elements of the *Carry On* films, gags inspired by a very British history of cuts to NHS funding, and insanely overstated satire *à la* Douglas Adams (one character is on a vendetta because they amputated his leg while treating an ingrowing toenail). Similar frolics await in *Galaxy Bodyguard Cutie Ai*, whose title really says it all. She's not a nurse, she doesn't wear a mini-skirt, but otherwise our shapely dumb-blonde bouncer looks, dresses and acts like a refugee from *Medilab Alpha*. But since Smith only keeps her around for three pages, there's hardly time to notice that this is the same bubblehead set-up with a different career path. *Neon Zebra* is fun, though Smith does exhibit a common fanzine flaw in devoting vastly more effort into drawing his babes than his backgrounds. The curvy nurses are drawn with consummate skill, but the rest of the universe (including the men) has been knocked up in considerably less time. That aside, this is a fanzine of fine fooling, which courteously checks itself out before you can get bored with the one-note gags. ●

Neon Zebra #1 is available for £1.50 from Mark Smith, 31 Dunedin Avenue, Stockton-on-Tees, Cleveland, TS18 5JH, UK.

COSMIC BENTO #7



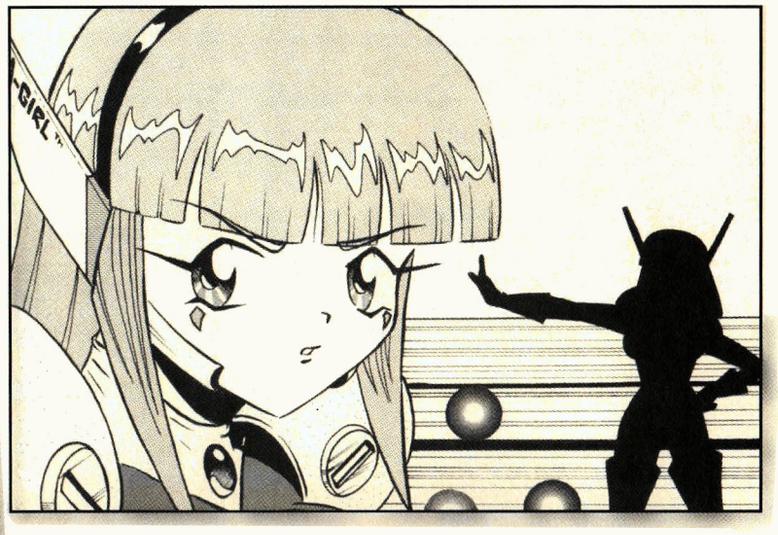
Barely a couple of months after we covered issue six in MM3, *Cosmic Bento* is back, now with a new 'Serial Experiments' coverline (geddit?). Down once more to 32 pages, but with the price still at £2.50, this streamlined version features two all-new strips. *Magical Princess Dinky Pipsqueak* is still there, taking a long-overdue swing at Manga Entertainment's Millets fashion line and also appearing in her own character sketch page. I, for one, can't wait to read more of the adventures of Satoshi the Slug and Derek the Dustbunny, and dread discovering exactly what the Dinky Stick is for. There's also a tongue-in-cheek profile of voice actress Kotono Mitsuishi which describes her execrable performance in a Christmas conga line wearing bunny ears.

But what of the new stories? Phil Laskey's *Hunter Crimson* is a moody piece of scowling Gothic, set in an alternate world where cloaked adventurers alight from a steam train and set off for a stately home with a tooth-grindingly creepy atmosphere. The air is loaded with anticipation as they march towards the dysfunctional household of Lady Helde, complete with portentous mutilations and torment. The adventurers themselves seem a little lacklustre in comparison to the starey-eyed nutcases waiting for them in the mansion. The satanic denizens of

Helde's house have such addictively unsettling dialogue that it's almost disappointing when the scene shifts to the bickering protagonists – but doubtless the sparks will fly when the two groups finally meet.

Laskey's script is an exercise in world-building – effortlessly showing instead of telling, with throwaway lines creating a very real sense of an unreal world. A completely different kind of unreal awaits in Iain McClumpha's *Ultragirl*, a superhero spoof in which a Japanese teen girl finds herself caught up in a battle between a giant rampaging monster and a just-as-giant tart in thigh-high boots and a skin-tight bikini. It's got helicopters, it's got sapphic snogs and it's got a silly acronym – all designed as a cheery satire on Japanese monster shows. ●

Cosmic Bento #7 is available for £2.50 from Iain McClumpha, 76 Glencroft Road, Kings Park, Glasgow, G44 5RD, or e-mail Phil Laskey on yuna@globalnet.co.uk



ANIMAZEMENT 99

When anime director Yasuhiro Imagawa had surgery just before Animazement, it looked as if fans headed to the convention in Raleigh, North Carolina would not get to hear from the creator of the Giant Robo series.

But convention organisers didn't give up. They found a speaker-phone and arranged for Imagawa to call the North Raleigh Hilton, where the convention was held. With a red Teletubbie taking his place at the head table and an interpreter sitting next to the phone, Imagawa spoke to fans at both of his scheduled Animazement panels – which happened on time despite the 14-hour time difference between the US and Japan.

That showed how far Animazement organisers went to please those fans who attended the convention. Despite 16 science fiction and anime conventions around the US on the same weekend (and having a competing sci-fi con a short drive away in High Point, NC), 1200 fans attended Animazement, nearly twice as many as the previous year.

It was all but impossible to get bored. The events schedule started at mid-morning on Friday, so early that the hotel didn't have some of the rooms ready for the convention. Most events started on time, and the three video rooms ran around the clock, showing everything from the new (*His Secret Her Secret*, *Virgin Fleet*) to the old (*Bubblegum Crisis*, *Dirty Pair*).

Nov Takahashi, head of Studio Hard, was a repeat visitor to Animazement. So was manga artist Rurika Fuyuki, who brought fellow artist Yukako Midori with her to North Carolina. But the big catch for Animazement was Yuu Watase, the creator of *Fushigi Yuugi*. The relatively small size of Animazement's crowds (one-quarter Anime Expo's attendance) gave Watase fans a great chance to get close to their favourite artist. Fans could chat with her during an open Thursday preview reception and pepper her with questions during two weekend panels. Watase even accepted an invitation to sit in on a meeting of female *Fushigi Yuugi* fans – and seemed delighted with the girls' antics.

Animazement's biggest problem was a power failure that hit the hotel on its final day. It was as convenient a blackout as you could get: it happened early Sunday morning, the power came back on after one hour, and the convention rolled along.

Were people satisfied? When the convention held its gripe session on its final day, only five people showed up. And on that same final day, Animazement announced they'd be back in the

Manga artists Rurika Fuyuki and Yukako Midori, obviously

Top: Manga artist Yuu Watase; Above: Takahashi, head of Studio Hard

DATA Convention

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E-mail: phoenix@cyberramp.net
http://www.a-kon.com/

Otakon 1999

2-4 July 1999
Baltimore Convention Center, MD, USA
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Contact: Otakon 1999, 661-A Waupelani Drive, State College, PA 16801, USA
E-mail: info@otakon.com
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Anime Expo 99

16-18 July 1999
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Contact: Anime Expo 99, 530 Showers Drive, Suite 7-287, Mountain View, CA 94040, USA
E-mail: reg@anime-expo.org
www.anime.expo.org/

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CN Anime Expo 99

27-29 August 1999
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Contact: Tel., 416 761 1760; Fax, 416 1751
www.hobbystar.com/cnanime/info.html

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Shinnenkai 99

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Anime North 99

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E-mail: dfs@interlog.com
http://animenorth.com

Animelowa 99

3-5 September 1999
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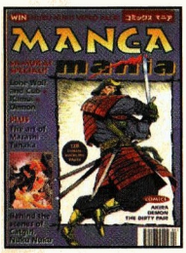

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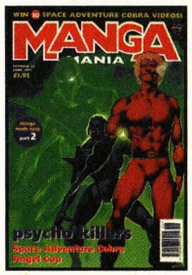

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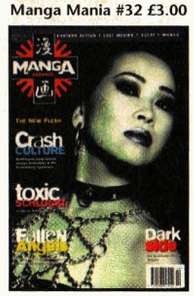

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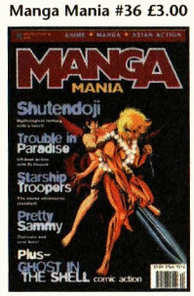

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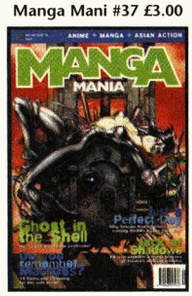

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Reviews

★★★★★ LOVE IT ★★★★ BUY IT ★★★ TRY IT ★★ WATCH IT ★ FORGET IT

Reviewers' opinions are not necessarily those of the magazine. National flags denote territory of release for the item being reviewed, and not necessarily the location of the dub or original distributor. Readers are reminded that the PAL and NTSC video formats are not interchangeable in a standard VCR.

US ANIME

The Adventures of Kotetsu

Format: VHS, dub/sub, NTSC
Director: Yuji Moriyama
Duration: 60 mins.
Certificate: unrated
Price: $19.98/$29.95
Distributor: ADV
Reviewer: Fred Patten
Rating: ★★

Movies like *Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein* are seldom effective as both good horror and as good comedies. At best they are either one or the other. At worst, as in *The Adventures of Kotetsu*, the two elements cancel each other out. Linn "Kotetsu" Suzuki is a young teen mystic samurai-in-training from Kyoto who runs away to Tokyo to join sexy private investigator Milio. Tatsuya Mikado is a sorcerous assassin hired to kill Milio, except that he gets distracted by gushing nosebleeds every time he accidentally sees Kotetsu naked, which is quite often. Then the three team up to battle Kagari, a leather-clad fragrant olive tree dryad dominatrix. The action alternates between suspenseful scenes and incongruous locker-room humour. Some wit is built around the contrast between Kotetsu's "old-fashioned" Kyoto dialect and the others' "modern" Tokyo dialect. ADV has translated the Kyoto dialect into something like Victorian English, which makes Kotetsu sound like an upper-class London snob posing as a street waif. *The Adventures of Kotetsu* anime was only ever scheduled for two episodes so you will have to find the original manga by MEE and translate it yourself if you want the answers to the mysteries. ●

Dragon League #1

Format. VHS, sub, NTSC
Director: Nobuhiro Takamoto
Duration: 40 mins
Certificate: unrated
Price: $24.95
Distributor: Star Anime Enterprises
Reviewer: Fred Patten
Rating: ★★★

This television series should be popular with *Pokemon* and *Dragon Ball* fans. In a fantasy world visually modelled upon Gurney's *Dinotopia*, inhabited by humans, funny animals and dinosaurs, soccer is practically a religion. Tokio is a young boy raised by his father in the woods to be a soccer player. Dad, obviously keeping lots of secrets, brings Tokio to the Kingdom of Elevenia (11 players on a soccer team), supposedly to begin his career. But Dad sneaks out the first night for a private grudge match with Elevenia's top soccer star, Leon (a funny-animal lion) – Dad loses, and is enchanted into a cute mini-dragon. Tokio must figure out what's happening on his own, as he joins an amateur team of funny-animal losers and starts to whip them into shape.

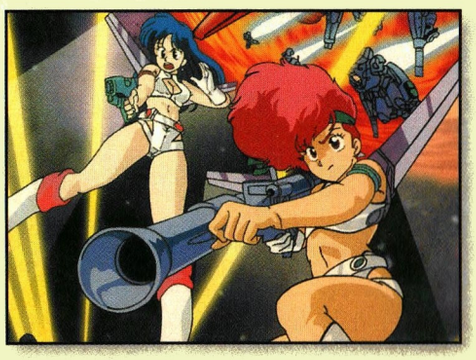
This video is unsatisfyingly packaged. These first two episodes are seamlessly edited into a mini-feature (ending on a cliffhanger), removing extra opening and closing credits and the episode two recap. This leaves only 40 minutes. It is more suitable for a general audience than for anime fans who want every frame of footage; but it should be dubbed for young viewers, although the subtitles are easy to read. Serious anime collectors would prefer a translation of the main credits, which are in English only on the video sleeve. ●

Original Dirty Pair #1

Format: VHS, dub, NTSC
Director: Katsuyoshi Yatabe
Duration: 60 mins
Certificate: unrated
Price: $19.95
Distributor: ADV
Reviewer: Helen McCarthy
Rating: ★★★

The charm of these videos lies in the deeply dippy stories with their rabid enthusiasm for mass destruction, like a beat-em-up console game but with more humour. The Pair fight off hard men determined to escape a prison planet, a psychotic warden and sexist-pig marines in the first story, then move on to disrupt a Hallowe'en street party while on the trail of a rogue robot weapon reminiscent of Arnie's cyber-outing (though it takes itself less seriously), accidentally foiling a string of armed robberies en route.

This dub tries to capture the feeling of the videos – not the supposed 'original' screen incarnation of the Dirty Pair, which was a film cameo turned TV series, but let's not split hairs. Sadly, it doesn't succeed. The scripting is as lame as anything done for the modern teen television market, but the visuals are still great fun. The style and technique were never top-of-the-range; if you want to see what the Pair look like in expensive trappings, check the *Project Eden* movie made in the same year, 1987. Toshiyuki Kimori and Kohei Tanaka's score barely survives the messy sound mix, but the ending theme and credits ooze charm. Better without the dub, but still cute and still crazy after all these years. ●



Agent Aika #2

Format: VHS, dub, NTSC
Director: Katsuhiko Nishijima
Duration: 60 mins
Certificate: PG
Price: $24.99
Distributor: USMC
Reviewer: Lee Brimmicombe-Wood
Rating: ★★

In a world wrecked by global warming, effete evil genius Hagen launches a vast spaceship into orbit. He is preparing to wipe humanity clean from the face of the Earth, and repopulate it with his own offspring, courtesy of his ship's pert, mini-skirted crew. Only salvage agent Aika, with her sentient bra and her airhead pal Rion, can defeat the dastardly plan.

It's a cheap rip-off of *Moonraker*, of course. But how low can this show go? Well, way below the A-line, it seems. The panty fetishism of the show escalates to jaw-dropping proportions. An effect that had seemed charming in the first episode falls into the same trap as all bad erotica; repetition makes it dull and untitillating. Attempts to ape the Sixties spy thriller genre fail miserably. There's no wryness or wit to the series; only tits and ass. Oh, and some tentacles too.

The English-language cast, many using pseudonyms, have long since given up on the script and turn in bored, clock-watching performances. Only the high production quality of the animation saves it from utter ignominy. ●

Sakura Wars

Format: VHS, dub/sub, NTSC
Director: Takaaki Ishiyama
Duration: 60 mins.
Certificate: unrated
Price: $19.98/$29.95
Distributor: ADV
Reviewer: Fred Patten
Rating: ★★★

This is imaginative for a drama based upon a "best-selling video game"! Instead of emphasising as much martial-arts action as possible in a shallow story frame, these first two half-hour episodes feature a slow introduction of the setting and of the characters to fight a supernatural menace which is still mostly offstage. It is the Twenties in an alternate world with steam-powered dirigibles and automobiles. Instead of World War One, this world barely survived a global Demon War against monsters which are expected to return. Experiments with aura-powered "spirit armour" battle suits reveal that only a tiny number of women possess the necessary psionic strength to operate them. Gradually, seven young women from throughout the world are called together to form the Imperial Flower Attack Team of Tokyo's Capital Defence Force. Sakura Shinguchi, Sumire Kanzaki, Ayame Fujieda, Maria Tachibana, Iris Chateaubriand, Ri Kouran, and Kanna Kirishima. The build-up is very slow, but the likeable characterisations (except for rich-bitch Kanzaki), the intelligent dialogue and pacing, and fine cinematic direction by Ishiyama make *Sakura Wars* worth watching even if you have never heard of the video game. Warning: this is the first of two videos, although the sleeve design does not indicate that the story breaks off midway. ●

Knights of Ramune

Format: VHS, dub/sub, NTSC
Director: Yoshitaka Fujimoto
Duration: 60 mins
Certificate: unrated
Price: $24.99/$29.99
Distributor: Software Sculptors
Reviewer: Julia Sertori
Rating: ★★

Busty babes Parfait and Cacao are on a quest to bring back the legendary knight Ramuness, only to discover that he's at the helm of the lead ship in an invading alien fleet. This involves a bit of espionage, spell-casting and a few gags about how underwear interferes with the power of magic as they run around a big spaceship in the company of a talking tumour, waiting for the enemy to bring the plot to them.

Set three years after the end of *Lamune & 40 Fire* (itself a sequel to the serials *LG40*, *LG40EX* and *LG40DX*), you might expect this to be as confusing as any other anime series you were dropped into six years after it started. But *Knights of Ramune* didn't have that effect on me, mainly because I had trouble getting interested enough to care about what I might have missed. This is the series that arguably kicked off the vogue for bright, primary colours and slick, bold strokes in character design for shows like *Tenchi Muyo* and *Beast Warriors*, but plot-wise it's as limp as a tapwater sandwich. The hours of back-story prove to be utterly inconsequential – if this were truly episode *one* of anything, I doubt it would make it very far.

Director Yoshitaka Fujimoto has helmed bright-and-bushy-tailed offerings like *Catgirl Nukunuku*

and *Akihabara Cyberteam* (which *Ramune* superficially resembles), but also has the tentacle-fest *Adventure Kid* lurking on his resumé. It's this that seems to have influenced him most, as gaping holes in the plot and action are papered over with perfunctory T&A and a few incidences of half-hearted sauciness. Watching this tape (as I did) straight after *Master of Mosquiton* was an eye-opening experience. While *Mosquiton* is supposedly aimed at an early-teen audience four years younger than the targets of *Ramune*, the *Ramune* crew seem to think that story and character aren't as important, because more 'mature' viewers can apparently be appeased by a couple of nipples and a bit of suggestive panting.

It's not a total bust, if you'll excuse the term. There are some frames of *Gunbuster*-inspired space warfare, and tantalisingly short bursts of excellent animation, but this has all been done better elsewhere, and, to put it simply, this is the kind of anime that leads first-time viewers to assume the entire medium is nothing but big eyes, explosions and weary plot-by-numbers. The US voice cast seem to think so too, indulging in over-the-top pseudonyms like Ruby Seedless and Autumn Harvest. When even the cast hold a programme in such contemptuous regard, it doesn't bode well for the public. ●

Master of Mosquiton

Format: VHS, dub/sub, NTSC
Director: Hiroshi Negishi
Duration: 60 mins
Certificate: unrated
Price: $19.98/$29.95
Distributor: ADV
Reviewer: Julia Sertori
Rating: ★★★

'All you ever wanted was my body as a beverage!' Inaho is a spunky red-haired Transylvanian lass, who has resurrected mild-mannered vampire Mosquiton in her quest for immortality. This, apparently, can be found in the mcguffin artefact known as the O-part. She *could* just let Mosquiton bite her, but I guess that would be a short show.

Before you can say 'coffin-breath', this (relatively) simple anime treasure hunt wanders into the middle of someone else's story, as alien invaders in a giant pyramid battle Rasputin and the Count de Saint Germaine for control of Twenties London. The end result is not unlike Tim Powers and Ben Elton forced at gunpoint to script an episode of *Indiana Jones*, but it works. Trust me.

After early, unsure scenes in which Inaho voice actress Heather Bryson is a little too strident and Satoru Akahori's script prefers pratfalls to banter, both Japanese and US crews click right on track. Matt Greenfield's dubbing script is snappily tongue-in-cheek, and contains his best/worst pun since the 'muffocation attack' in his *Kekko Kamen*. I won't give it away, but it involves sticking an icicle up someone's bum.

Even if you're watching the dub, you can still see vestiges of the original Japanese in-jokes, as Mosquiton actor Takehito Koyasu reprises a couple of Badd Mint gags to amuse the reunited writer and director from *Beast Warriors*. But US voice Guil Lunde matches Koyasu with a seen-it-all worldliness that perfectly captures our hero's immortal cynicism – he *has* seen it all, he *will* live forever, and the 'adventures' of his companions *are* laughable to him. The dub also comes complete with several convincing British voices and what seems to be a lone Kiwi straying far from home. Carol Matthews, whose unplaceable accent was described in MM4 as 'Martian', finally finds her ideal role as an evil alien space queen riding a giant sphinx.

Enjoyable tomb-raiding hokum for bloodsucking anime fans. If you ever wanted to crash *Stargate* into *Buffy*, well... you're very sick. But you'll love *Master of Mosquiton*. ●

Revolutionary Girl Utena: The Power of Dios

Format: VHS, dub/sub, NTSC
Director: Kunihiko Ikuhara
Duration: 75 mins
Certificate: unrated
Price: $24.99/$29.99
Distributor: Software Sculptors
Reviewer: Lee Brimmicombe-Wood
Rating: ★★

With its European setting and costume-drama trappings, *Revolutionary Girl Utena* tips its wand toward Tezuka's *Princess Knight* and Ikeda's *Rose of Versailles*. Utena Tenjo is the princess who dreams of being a prince. So when she appears at Otori Academy, she dresses as a boy, fences with the best, and to her dismay, wins a bride, the Stepford Wife-like Anthy. Around them, intrigues boil.

The head student is plotting a revolution (a coup, more like), and a mysterious onlooker watches Utena fight her way through a series of themed duels for friendship, choice, reason, love, adoration, conviction and self. Completing the set will release a great power.

On first viewing, Software Sculptor's flowery romance left me bewildered. Had I missed something that only a 10-year old Japanese girl could detect? I rewound the tape and watched again. I was right; it made little sense at all. There is an underlying message about lifestyle choices in here somewhere, but it's lost in the bombast, the ellipses, the shadow plays, the attempts at significance, and the sheer excess of the set pieces, such as the duelling sequence, where a chorus screams out biblical references and Darwinian theory to a bad rock track. What does it all mean? Answers on a postcard accepted from 10-year olds only. ●

UK ANIME

801 TTS AirBats: 1st Strike

Format: VHS, dub, PAL
Director: Yuji Moriyama
Duration: 85 mins
Certificate: PG
Price: £12.99
Distributor: ADV
Reviewer: Fred Patten
Rating: ★★★

A feature length compilation of the 3-episode video series, *AirBats* is a light romantic comedy in a surprisingly serious setting: a Japanese military base. The 801st Tactical Training Squadron is Japan's first all-female aerial unit. Created as a public relations ploy, it is the joke of Japan's male-oriented military establishment. Its own macho commanders Yumioka and Kengamine, are openly eager to disband it. As a result, morale is at a rock-bottom, until the arrival of Takuya Isurugi, an eager airforce fanboy assigned as their Flight Maintenance Specialist. The four pilots treat him at first like a nerdy kid brother, but his infectious enthusiasm raises their spirits; until top guns Miyuki Haneda and Arisa Mitaka both develop a crush on him. Their jealousy threatens the TTS' aerial coordination, inspiring Yumioka and Kengamine to use the love-triangle as an excuse to disband the team. Can the naïve Takuya find the maturity to stop the situation from nose-diving into a fatal crash? It is quickly obvious that this is a comedy, so cartoony character designs and traditional sit-com coincidences do not seem out of place. For contrast, Takuya daydreams several very good dramatic scenes of serious aerial combat, and a hilarious parody in which the AirBats battle a silly Giant Monster. Far better value than the original three-tape release; look out for the sequels *2nd Strike* and *3rd Strike*. ●

Fist of the North Star TV

Format: VHS, dub, PAL
Director: Toyo'o Ashida
Duration: 64 mins
Certificate: 15
Price: £12.99
Distributor: Manga Entertainment
Reviewer: Peter J. Evans
Rating: ★★★

In the ruins of post-apocalypse Japan, only one man stands between the battered, demoralised survivors and the gangs of vicious thugs who prey on them. That man is Kenshiro, lone adept of the deadly martial art of the Great Bear, bearer of the seven scars that mark him as the Fist of the North Star.

This tape contains the first three episodes of the television series, which was made back in 1984. As such, it suffers a little in comparison with newer works; the animation is of a quality only to be expected from mid-Eighties television anime. The music has been pumped up with some effective techno tracks, but in all, *Fist* is corny, formulaic and morally dubious.

In a way, however, all these problems can be forgiven. The show is at least honest about its intentions, the stylised artwork serves the subject matter well enough, and the whole thing is by no means overly offensive. Even the famous head-popping action takes place in back-lit silhouette.

There is nothing here you haven't seen before. Those wanting originality or high art should go elsewhere, but for beat-em-up fans *Fist* will be like slipping back into a comfy pair of slippers. ●

Bubblegum Crisis #1

Format: VHS, dub, PAL
Director: Katsuhito Akiyama
Duration: 102 mins
Certificate: PG
Price: £13.99
Distributor: MVM
Reviewer: Peter J Evans
Rating: ★★★★

Bubblegum Crisis, Toshimichi Suzuki's eight–part tale of high tech, high–kicking mercenary vigilantes has been a firm favourite among anime fans since the first part was made back in 1987. Now mail–order company MVM have begun releasing Animeigo's dubbed version of the show, putting out the whole series across a mere three tapes.

If there is any downside to this deal, it has to be said that the three stories on this tape are starting to show their age, but this is no more than a minor niggle. *Crisis* is still a classic, and three episodes for the price of one just can't be bad.

The voice acting is extremely good (even if it is sometimes hard to tell which Knight Saber is speaking when they all have their visors down), and the script is equally fine, with jokes that work and dialogue that actually sounds like real people talking. Even more impressive are the show's famous songs, translated into English in such a way that they rhyme, scan (most of the time), and still have all the loan–words in the right places.

Only people who already have these episodes shouldn't buy them. For everyone else, they are stonkingly good value. ●

Dirty Pair Flash Mission 2 #1

Format: VHS, dub, PAL
Director: Tomomi Mochizuki
Duration: 85 mins
Certificate: PG
Price: £12.99
Distributor: ADV
Reviewer: Melissa Hyland
Rating: ★★★

Kei and Yuri return in their new incarnation as rookie agents causing destruction and mayhem (so no change there, then). Their latest assignment is to babysit a fellow agent, who is trying to iron out a virus affecting the central computer of World's World, a giant amusement park recreating twentieth-century Japan. It isn't long before this simple assignment becomes a destructive cocktail of assassins, con men and haunted schools and the Dirty Pair are soon racking up the collateral damage, in spades.

Despite the opinion of some fans, I rather like the new character designs and the way their personalities are more clearly delineated, with Kei acting more tomboyish and Yuri as the spoilt little princess. Unfortunately, the dub is somewhat grating (especially the actress playing Yuri), but you can ignore it after a while once the explosions start. Obviously anyone looking for deep complexity will be disappointed; it's all good mindless fun and daft plot devices, but I doubt it would stand up to repeated watchings. *Evangelion* it ain't. ●

August in the Water

Format: Theatrical, sub
Director: Sogo Ishii
Duration: 117 mins
Certificate: unrated
Distributor: ICA Projects
Reviewer: Jeremy Clarke
Rating: ★★★★★

Summer term in heatwave-smitten Kyushu and high school student Ukiya (Masaki Takarai) falls for school high-diving champ Izumi (Rena Komine), then discovers a dangerous date on her horoscope coincides with a big diving contest. Plunging towards the pool from the top board, time freezes for Izumi as the water turns momentarily into rock inscribed with mystic symbols: seconds later, she crashes clumsily into the water. When the hospitalised girl recovers, her personality has changed. Now she goes for walks in the hillside forest where a UFO is rumoured to have been sighted. Then, at full moon, she disappears and a meteorite is stolen from a research lab. Meanwhile, all over the city, an unexplained epidemic named Stone Disease – in which people collapse as their internal organs petrify – claims more and more victims.

Loosely recalling *The Big Blue*, this follow up/companion piece to director Ishii's equally masterful *Angel Dust* proves similarly compelling. The most memorable sequences – unexpected collapses in the streets, schoolgirl divers plunging purposefully through air towards water, couples found lying together on a huge boulder in the forest – linger unforgettably in the mind, while slow pacing effectively helps convey a sense of ever-worsening urban drought. ●

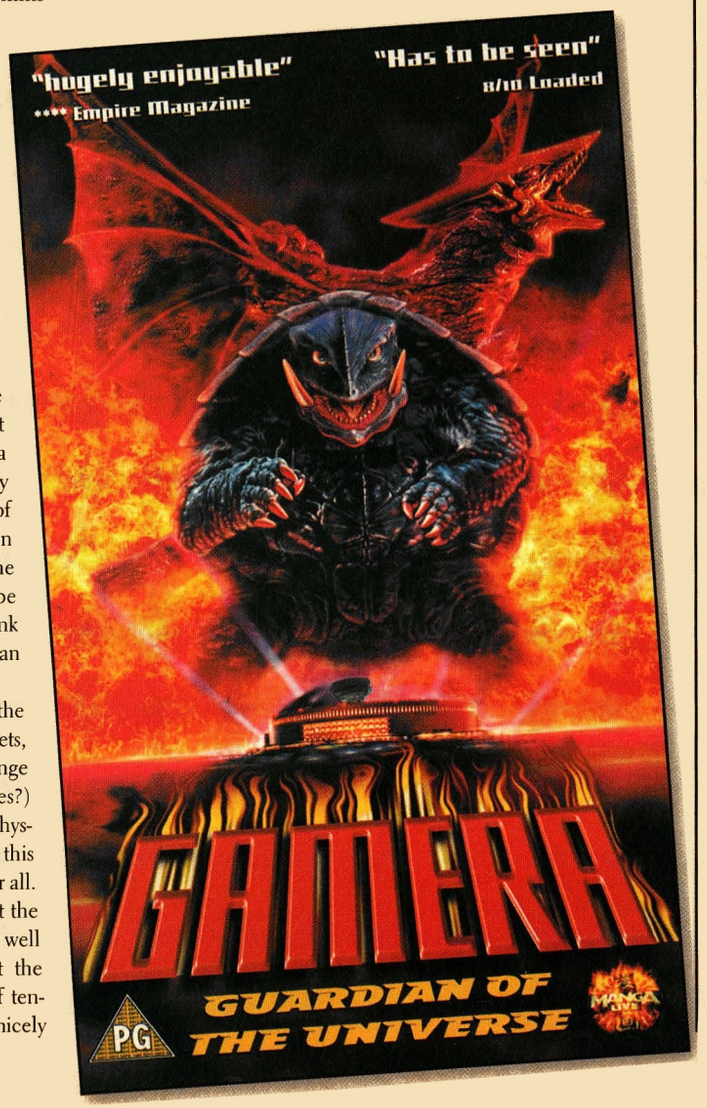
Gamera

Format: VHS, dub, PAL
Director: Shusuke Kaneko
Duration: 90 mins
Certificate: PG
Price: £13.99
Distributor: Manga Entertainment
Reviewer: Peter J Evans
Rating: ★★★

While a series of collisions at sea lead scientists to believe that a drifting island is heading towards Japan, a small fishing village falls prey to a family of huge flying reptiles. The mobile island turns out to be Gamera, a sixty-metre bipedal turtle that seems intent on destroying the fliers. Gamera falls foul of the Japanese military for his troubles, but when one of the airborne horrors grows to even greater size and makes a nest in the Tokyo Tower, it may only be Gamera – and his empathic link with a young schoolgirl – that can save Japan from destruction.

It barely needs to be said that the monsters look like rubber muppets, the dubbing sounds very strange (Cockney Japanese housewives?) and there are moments of quite hysterical unintentional humour – this is a Japanese monster movie, after all. What *does* need to be said is that the special effects are handled very well indeed (especially the battle at the suspension bridge), the levels of tension and excitement are kept nicely high, and the peculiar techno-trance music actually works, most of the time. And the ending has got some of the biggest explosions ever.

It's much better than the US *Godzilla*. But maybe that didn't need to be said, either. ●



The Big Hit

Format: Theatrical
Director: Kirk Wong
Duration: 91 mins
Certificate: 18
Distributor: Sony Columbia
Reviewer: Jeremy Clarke
Rating: ★★

Executive-produced by, among others, John Woo and his producer Terence Chang, this American debut of highly-regarded Hong Kong director Wong (*Crime Story*, *Organised Crime & Triad Bureau*), *Rock & Roll Cop* stars Mark Wahlberg of *Boogie Nights* fame as a no-hoper hitman wannabe named Melvin Smiley. If this is already starting to sound implausible, that's because the script itself is scarcely convincing.

On the one hand, it wants to be the efficient action thriller which, in occasional scenes, Wong delivers. On the other, it wants to be a laugh-a-minute, day-glo art comedy-of-manners – a sensibility not in evidence anywhere in Wong's Hong Kong oeuvre and to which he appears patently unsuited.

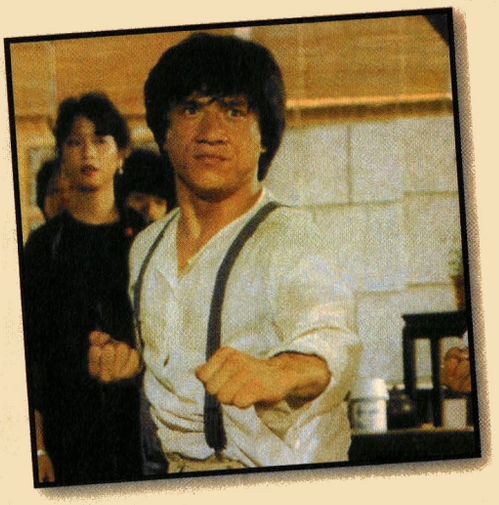
Wahlberg gets a whole domestic subplot with a kosher Jewish girlfriend (Christina Applegate) and her anxious parents (Elliot Gould and Lainie Kazan) where Wong's direction falls flat for lack of familiarity with the cultural milieu. He's on surer ground with a kidnap plot concerning American Japanese mobster's daughter China Chow – which leads, for instance, to a gripping shot of violently shutting a car boot against Chow's head cutting to an embarrassingly bad, *who's-coming-out-of-which-door* farce in the next. A couple of terrific action sequences (including some amazing bungee-jumping stunts by Wahlberg in the first ten minutes) nowhere near compensate. ●

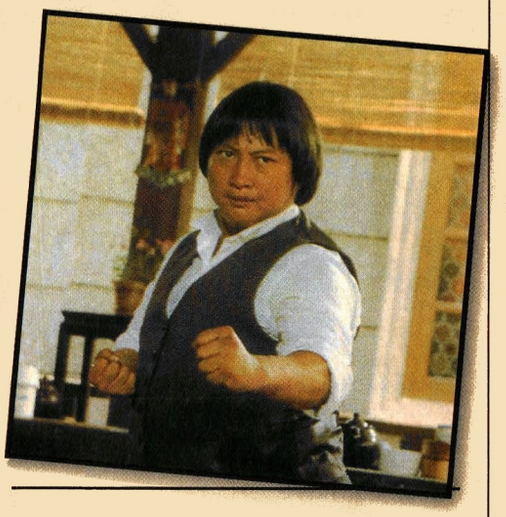
Project A

Director: Jackie Chan
Format: VHS, sub, widescreen, PAL
Duration: 100 mins
Certificate: 15
Price: £12.99
Distributor: Made in Hong Kong
Reviewer: Jeremy Clarke
Rating: ★★★★★

Widescreened at a ratio of about 2:1 (losing any more picture off the sides would make it unwatchable) this introduced the trio of Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao (playing a sailor, a crook and a cop). It also established Chan's stunt credentials as a fight performer with its unique stunt-comedy feel, an unlikely (but brilliant) marriage of contemporary martial arts and classic Hollywood silent comedy against a turn of the century backdrop. Indeed, one of the showstopping set pieces has Chan dangle perilously from a clocktower in the manner of Harold Lloyd in *Safety Last* (1923) before falling through three awnings. Watch the end credits to see the take that went wrong when the final canopy failed to properly break Chan's fall.

An almost equally horrific outtake shows him ride a bicycle, collide with a stepladder and land badly on the ground in a narrow alleyway. This brings us to the other outstanding sequence, wherein speeding bicyclists are unseated by top-half doors opening out of walls into their faces or charged with makeshift jousting lances, and bicycles are even used are weapons. Elsewhere, a perfunctory plot enables the action to proceed at break-neck speed making the overall end result hugely enjoyable. ●





Project A II

Director: Jackie Chan
Format: VHS, dub/widescreen sub, PAL
Duration: 100 mins
Certificate:15
Price: £12.99
Distributor: Made in Hong Kong
Reviewer: Jeremy Clarke
Rating: ★★★

The hideous halfway-house 16:9 widescreen presentation lops much important pic information off its sides, but was presumably the only master available to the generally-conscientious distributors. Despite suffering at the hands of the transfer, Chan reprises his police sergeant role from *Project A* while Sammo Hung and Yuen Biao are noticeably absent. There's a lot more (stunt-free) slapstick farce this time round, relying on the comedic talents not only of leading ladies Maggie Cheung and Rosamund Kwan but also Bill Tung (playing a variant on his *Police Story* role as Chan's boss). The fun reaches its climax when Cheung hides various different parties from one another under beds and behind curtains while bowler-hatted kidnappers lurk in a cupboard.

Numerous fight sequences culminate in a sausage factory where a giant piston descends repeatedly into a pit threatening to turn Chan into spam, but nothing comes near the original's bike chase. The closing minutes, however, do achieve another silent movie homage, this time to Buster Keaton's *Steamboat Bill Jr* (1928), when a building front falls on Chan, who survives by standing exactly where the window should be. ●

Labyrinth of Dreams

Format: Theatrical, sub
Director: Sogo Ishii
Duration: 90 mins
Certificate: unrated
Distributor: ICA Projects
Reviewer: Jeremy Clarke
Rating: ★★★★

Ishii's most recent offering departs from the urban science fiction of *Angel Dust* and *August in the Water*, opting instead for a rural period ghost story shot in stylish black and white. The period is pre-WW2, the milieu that of Japanese rural bus employees. *August in the Water's* Rena Komine plays Tomiko, a young bus guide whose best friend dies in an inexplicable night-time bus accident involving a train following her engagement to bus driver Mr Niitaka (Tadanobu Asano of *Shark-Skin Man & Peach-Hip Girl*). A local legend details the murders of female bus guides engaged to a particular bus driver who may or may not be Mr Niitaka. Tomiko wants to avenge her friend but finds herself inexplicably drawn to Niitaka.

As its English title so perfectly suggests, this operates on a near-subliminal, nightmarish level. Komine's edgy performance and Ishii's stylish *mise-en-scene* invest the piece with an incredible sense of dread. If it's ultimately a less impressive achievement than Ishii's two prior works, the director certainly can't be accused of repeating himself and remains very much his own man. ●

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COMICS

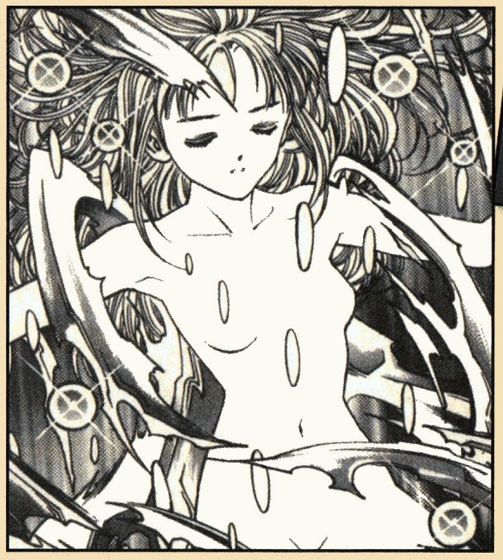
Shadow Lady: Dangerous Love #7

Format: Comic
Dark Horse, $2.50
Writer/Artist: Masakazu Katsura
Reviewer: Julia Sertori
Rating: ★★★

Superheroine, gentlewoman thief, bondage queen and kung fu vixen, but all she really wants is a man to call her own, and she's even picked him out from the line-up. Poor little Aimi has finally realised her problem – she's only confident when she's caked in magic slap. When the war-paint comes off, she loses her Shadow Lady identity and any chance of being the kind of creature who could ask *anyone* on a date, let alone the man of her dreams.

But when the new Impudence make-up series comes on the market, Aimi decides to swipe it from the make-up counter so she can have a bit of the Shadow Lady powers in her everyday life. But her police nemeses are lying in wait, in a fittingly camp and cheesy denoument to the *Dangerous Love* sequence.

Because I have to sit here being told by television that I want make-up that's 'practically weightless' (what the hell does that mean!?), because I live in permanent hope of seeing an advert for 'Twee, by Lentheric' or 'Worthless Slut from L'Oreal', because I don't give a toss what liposomes are, and because Johnson & Johnson 'Pore-Cleaning Nose Strips' are just pieces of sodding masking tape – for all these reasons *Shadow Lady*'s ultimate message of being yourself *for* yourself is a valuable lesson for a putative



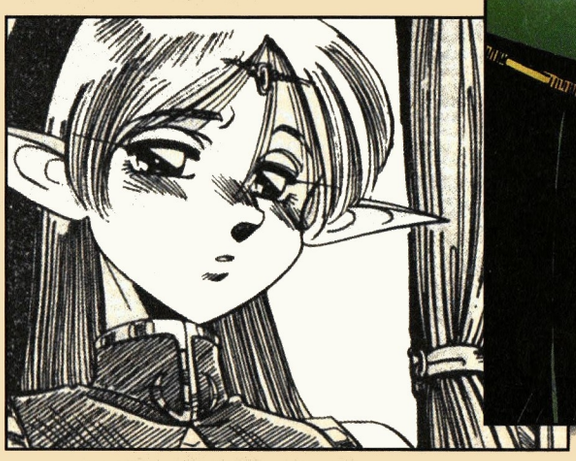
audience of teenage girls. Judging by the letters page, a night-club toilet pow-wow with agony-aunt and big-sister Rachel Penn, Dark Horse are hitting the mark bang-on, with the inevitable crossover into the more traditional boys' audience.

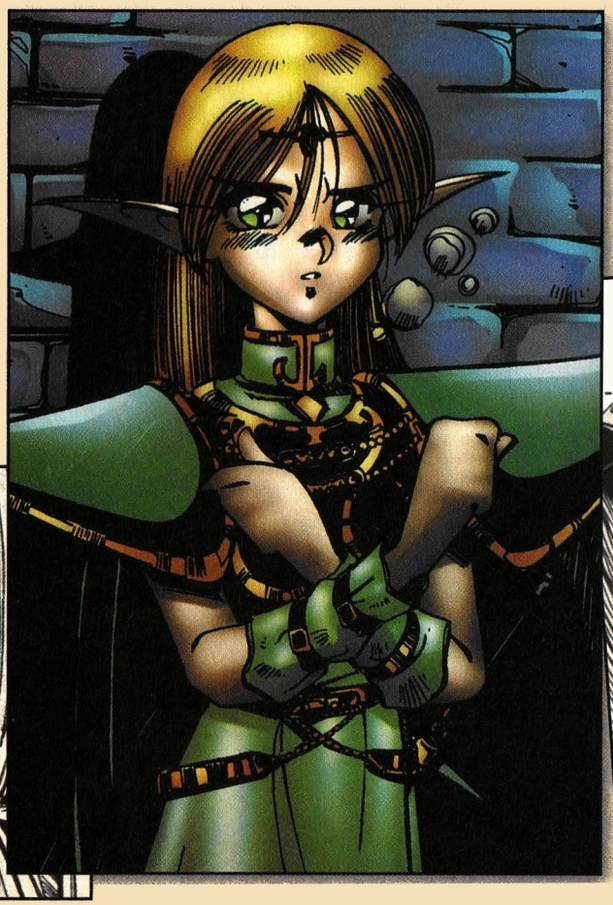
Eyes of a Stranger is the next mini-series and already on the way – Toren Smith demonstrating a secret predilection for Queensrÿche song titles, I wonder? Make-up, boys, shoplifting and martial arts – takes me back, oh, how it takes me back. ●

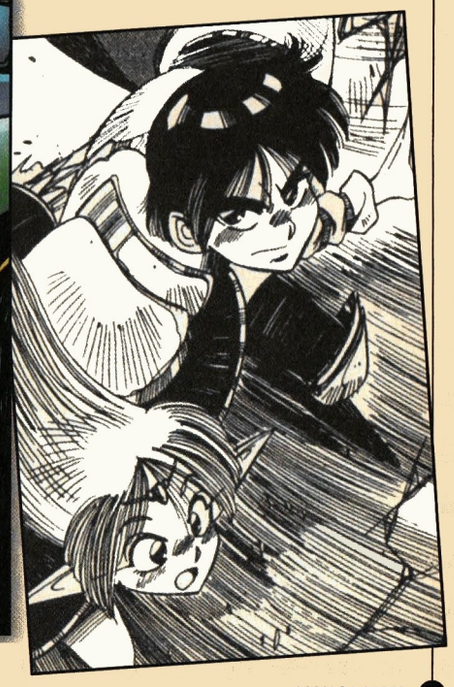
Record of Lodoss War: The Grey Witch #5

Format: Comic
CPM Manga, $2.95
Writer: Ryo Mizuno
Artist: Yoshihiko Ochi
Reviewer: Melissa Hyland
Rating: ★★

Every fantasy series needs its band of heroes, comprising a mixture of races and career choices, and *Lodoss War* is no exception. Having got its token warrior Parn, elf-babe Deedlit, dwarf, cleric and sorcerer together, the group now meet their required thief Woodchuck at a local tavern. He reveals the whereabouts of the stolen treasure they are currently hunting, and that it is not merely the work of common thieves – the dark forces of the island of Marmo are involved. The group prepare to infiltrate the manor where the treasure is held, only to fall foul of the ogre and dark elf guarding it. Those who are into roleplaying games will immediately recognise the format here. This is standard, by-the-numbers *Dungeons and Dragons*, with very little variation. The artwork is also rather uninspiring; it's competent enough, but it doesn't stand up well next to the anime adaptation of *Lodoss War*. Anyone who picks this up after seeing the videos may be disappointed, likewise fantasy fans looking for something a little deeper than cute girls with pointy ears. ●







Gunsmith Cats: Bean Bandit

Format: Comic
Dark Horse $2.95
Writer/Artist: Kenichi Sonoda
Reviewer: Lee Brimmicombe-Wood
Rating: ★★★

Bounty hunter Rally Vincent is gunless and jobless after a bad drugs episode and a run-in with legendary getaway driver Bean Bandit left her empty-handed. Now she's out to get some payback as roguish Bean challenges her again. If she can prevent him completing a drugs run, he swears he'll drop drugs trafficking altogether. If she fails, she has to lay off him for good.

So far, so formula. Sadly, Kenichi Sonoda's strip doesn't strive for anything more interesting than a bunch of second-rate private eye-show tropes. His one-dimensional slit-skirted heroine, Rally, is just another ballsy girl with a gun fetish. Rally's vacuous sidekick, Minnie-May, has had her age massaged upward to conceal the fact that she is, strictly speaking, jail-bait. Only the series' cruelty and nastiness stand it out.

This comic would get a poor rating if it wasn't for the fact it is so well drawn. The lean, uncrowded page layouts lead the eye round at a ferocious clip. Sonoda's line is as tight as a drum and his finish is crisp and clean; there's little that goes to waste here. It's just a shame Sonoda can't use his prodigious talent to find anything more interesting to say. ●

Night Warriors: Darkstalkers' Revenge #4

Format: Comic
Viz $2.95
Writer/Artist: Run Ishida
Reviewer: Melissa Hyland
Rating ★★

Based on the Capcom video games, this is set in a Gothic version of Earth, where vampires and monsters really exist. One such creature is Morrigan, a beautiful bat-winged succubus who drains the souls of men. The mysterious warrior Donovan volunteers to rid a village of her presence, but is held back by the fear of his own inner darkness.

Run Ishida renders the *Darkstalkers* characters nicely, though his style differs greatly from that in the games. However, those who've never played any of them before could find themselves rather confused by the lack of back story. There are a few flashbacks of Donovan's past, hinting at a possible half-vampire heritage that caused him to be attacked by humans and lose his mother, fuelling his vendetta against all vampires. Yet this is not enough to give the full picture of the *Darkstalkers* world or allow it to rise above the standard pattern of a fantasy adventure series. There's not much substance to be had here and one wonders if there's any point to this series – you might just as well play the games instead. ●

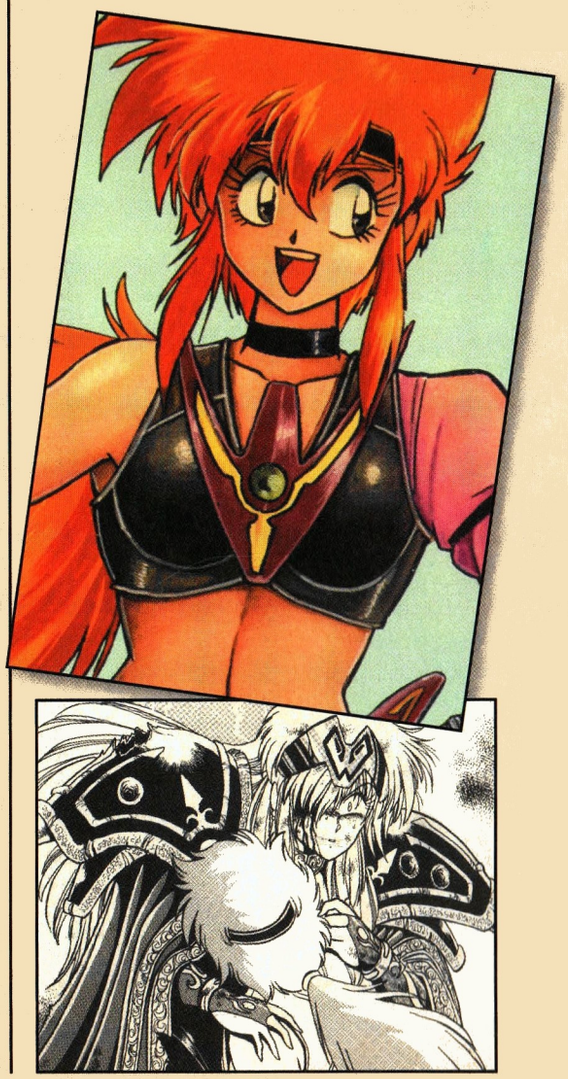
Caravan Kidd #3

Format: Compilation
Dark Horse $19.95
Writer/Artist: Johji Manabe
Reviewer: Jim Swallow
Rating: ★★★

The slapstick action saga of android babe Mian Toris comes to an end in this latest compilation of Dark Horse's *Caravan Kidd* manga. Creator Johji Manabe, whose earlier work *Outlanders* was a hit in translation, stays on the same track with a bizarre mix of science fiction and fantasy themes blended with a healthy dose of fart gags – it is almost British in its toilet humour. *Carry On Kidd*, if you will.

The plot is simple enough, with red-head robot Toris strutting her stuff in her ironclad bikini while comic relief sidekicks Wataru (a lecherous young fellah like Arnold Rimmer on speed) and Babo (half-Furby, half-Ferengi) act as foils for the comedy moments. In amid the laffs is Toris' true mission, a quest to hunt down and destroy her nemesis, the Empress Shion, and the power games of Shion's military leaders, who are out to seize control for themselves.

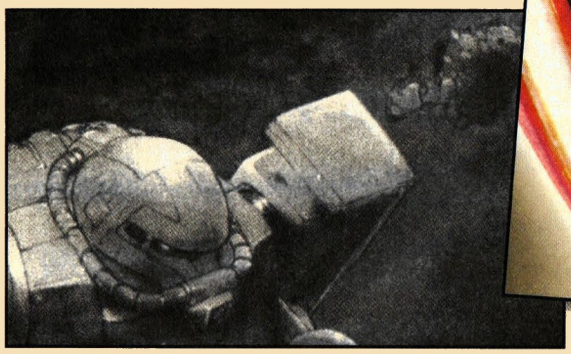
Manabe manages to make *Caravan Kidd* work on both the dumb-funny and regular-funny levels, but in the end it is all a bit juvenile and reading it in one sitting shows up how silly it really is. With jokes as broad as the Atlantic, this is daft and undemanding hokum, Matron. ●



Mobile Suit Gundam 0079

Format: Comic
Viz, $2.95
Writers: Hajime Yadate & Yoshiyuki Tomino
Artist: Kazuhisa Kondo
Reviewer: Jim Swallow
Rating: ★★★

An interesting addition to Viz's manga stable, this initial eight-issue adaptation of the 1994 comic of the original giant robot show is showing its age around the edges when compared with more recent mecha material like *Evangelion*. And yet, as the benchmark genre show to which every other that came after has been compared, it bears a second look. *Gundam* creator Tomino has clearly slimmed down and streamlined the multi-part television series narrative, and Kondo, a noted *Gundam* aficionado, has tried to evoke the Seventies art stylings of the original anime. But where the script succeeds, Kondo's old-fashioned art comes across as static and it often lacks the verve of the "four-colour" series, especially in the action sequences. *Mobile Suit Gundam 0079* is certainly a title that deserves to be published in the West, but given its occasional slippage into below-average tie-in feel, I can't help thinking it might have been better served in a longer, better-value collected edition. ●



Inu-Yasha 2: 7

Format: Comic, Viz, $3.25
Writer/Artist: Rumiko Takahashi
Reviewer: Peter J. Evans
Rating: ★★★★

Described as a 'feudal fairy tale', *Inu-Yasha* is the story of Kagome, a schoolgirl who travels back in time to medieval Japan through a magical well. There she meets Inu-Yasha, a half-demon who, bound to Kagome by a controlling spell, must assist the girl on her quest for the shards of a powerful magic crystal.

In this instalment, Kagome and Inu-Yasha, plus the pair of diminutive demons that accompany them, encounter a village that has been decimated by horrible monsters called 'spider heads'. Despite Inu-Yasha's reservations they stop to help, but the malignancy of their enemy and the sudden waning of Inu-Yasha's powers combine to get the team into very bad trouble indeed.

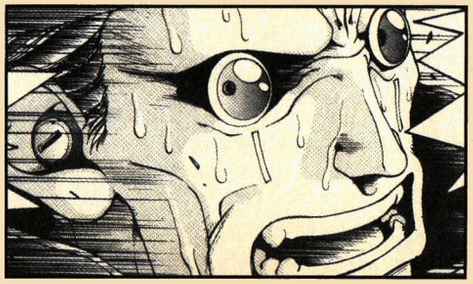
This is a fantastic comic; well-drawn, tightly-plotted and scalp-crawlingly creepy. The bickering interplay between the characters is spot on, making the reader feel at home with them after only a few pages, and the sinister nature of the tale is lightened just enough by Takahashi's trademark humour. People tend to forget that the author of *Urusei Yatsura* can tackle horror with the same skill as she writes comedy, but *Inu-Yasha* is the perfect way to be reminded. There is some genuinely disturbing stuff in here. Especially if you don't like spiders... ●

Mechanical Man Blues

Format: Comic
Radio Comix, $2.95
Writer/Artist: Tsukasa Kotobuki
Reviewer: Jim Swallow
Rating: ★★★

Despite the smart pun in the title (the original Japanese can be pronounced *Ai-ki-do*) you'd be forgiven for thinking that *Mechanical Man Blues* is the love-child of a manga mating between *Plastic Little* and *Battle Angel Alita*. Kotobuki's tale has the oddly-limbed, spindly mechanoids of the latter, and the hugely improbable breasts of the former in this tale of an android called Gun.

Humanity is under siege from Gun's fellow artificial lifeforms and the fleshy ones are losing, so enter doomed babe Lady Sonia, who tracks down the off-line Gun in hopes of turning him to their defence. Gun is a prototype android able to do some serious harm, and it's Sonia's intent to make him mankind's champion. In the opening issue, she dies defending her village and the stage is set for her daughter Poporo to carry on the fight with Gun as her protector. We've seen this all before, but Kotobuki imbeds enough force into the graphic narrative that the you're drawn along; it's only questions such as 'Why does Sonia wear only a string bikini while everyone else dresses in heavy coats and armour?' that blow the otherwise pacey mood. ●

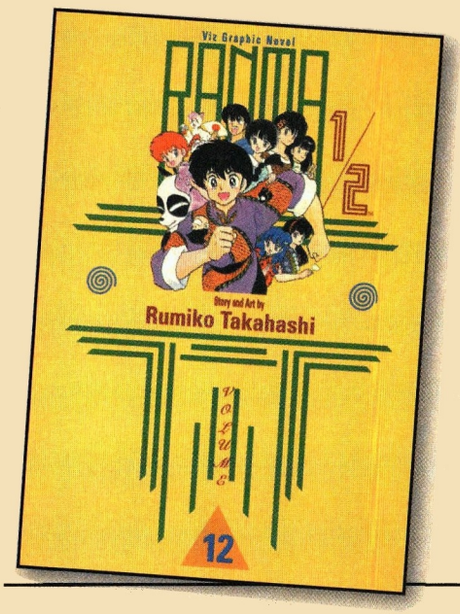


Ranma 1/2 #12

Format: Compilation
Viz Comunications $15.95
Writer/Artist: Rumiko Takahashi
Reviewer: Lee Brimmicombe-Wood
Rating: ★★

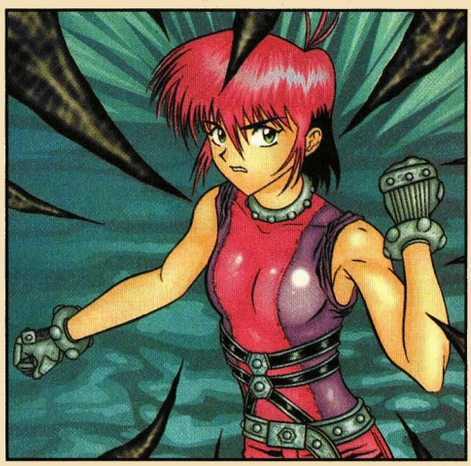
Rumiko Takahashi's sex-change martial arts comedy drags on and on. In this collection Ranma Saotome must defeat diminutive roué Happosai so as to remove a curse which saps his strength; disposable foreign babe Shampoo conjures up a cat spirit to nudge Ranma into her clutches, and hapless Akane requires a swimming lesson from her half-boy half-girl fiancé.

Whatever charm the *Ranma* series once possessed has long since evaporated. Takahashi put character and plot development on hold long ago in favour of an interminable series of comedy sketches. Though slickly executed, the sameness of the episodes shows how bankrupt of ideas the series became. Takahashi milked the strip for ten years before she threw in the towel; though according to Toshio Okada's *Introduction to Otakuology*, during that time the popularity of *Ranma*'s *Shonen Sunday* showcase steadily declined. *Ranma* seems curiously out of step in the West, a reactionary tale in which an unmarriageable tomboy, Akane, has to endure humiliating lessons in femininity from her macho asshole boyfriend. Only committed fans will like this work. ●



Trouble Express #2

Format: Comic
Radio Comix, $2.95
Writer/Artist: Will Allison
Reviewer: Lee Brimmicombe-Wood
Rating: ★



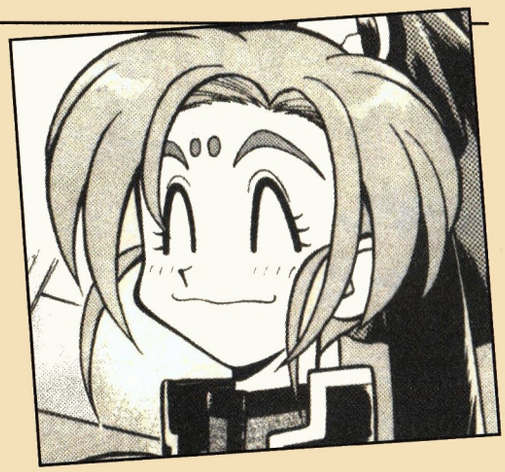
The trouble with *Trouble Express*, Will Allison's pseudomanga, is that it is a pro comic, so we have to judge it by pro standards. But try as I might to be generous, this is fanzine-level stuff. Allison has read enough manga to have picked some visual grammar and a bunch of received tricks, but this doesn't conceal the fact that he lacks the skill to execute the work to a pro standard.

Allison's SF storyline apes several space anime. His pen line is smooth, though scanning the line art into Photoshop has allowed him to clean it up and conceal fundamental flaws by throwing screen effects around. However, his figure work is awkward and shows an artist desperately in need of the discipline of life drawing classes. The backgrounds are sterile, poorly rendered, and (crime of crimes) ruled. The layouts show some storytelling sense, but the panels are flat and unimaginative. Allison needs more practice, and a copy of that indispensible reference for beginners – *Wally Wood's Lazy Layouts* – pinned to his board.

I don't want to sound discouraging; there's enough raw talent here that in time Allison could be producing some top-notch comics. But for your three bucks, *Trouble Express* is, at best, a sophomoric piece of work. ●

No Need For Tenchi 6: 3

Format: Comic, Viz Comics, $3.25
Writer/Artist: Hitoshi Okuda
Reviewer: Peter J. Evans
Rating: ★



Following on from the original six episodes of *Tenchi Muyo*, this comic continues the misadventures of high-school student Tenchi and an ever-growing cast of deranged alien women. This particular segment concerns itself with a confrontation between the regular characters and Yume, an 'evil genius' with a schizophrenic martial-arts robot as a bodyguard. The alien warrior Gohgei will need all his powers to defeat this new threat, but a secret from his past is stopping him fighting to the best of his ability.

Granted, this far into the series is hardly the right place to start, but even so *No Need For Tenchi* is a sorry effort. Minimalist plotting (the entire comic contains little more than a couple of punches and a one-page dream sequence), confusing character designs and dialogue as flat as a tram ticket do not make for an entertaining read. The artwork is crisp enough in terms of line, but there are no backgrounds save some dodgey marbled zipatone at the beginning. And, worst of all, *Tenchi* isn't half as funny as it thinks it is.

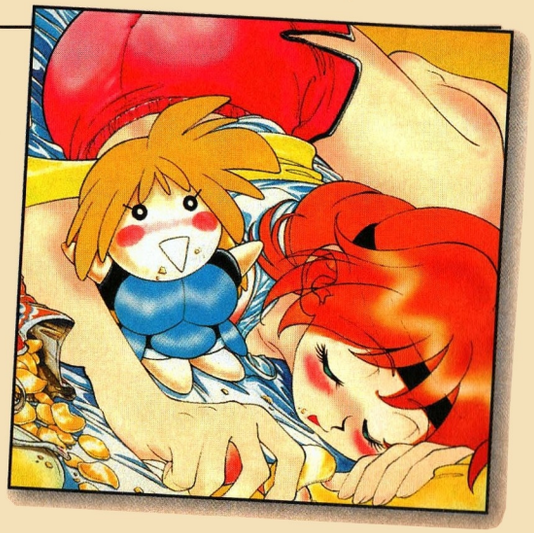
Completist fans of the original might want this, but anyone else should save their pennies. ●

Slayers #6

Format: Comic
CPM Manga, $2.95
Writer: Hajime Kanzaka
Artist: Rui Araizumi
Reviewer: Melissa Hyland
Rating: ★★

This stand-alone story rounds off the mess that is *Slayers* the manga, with Lina and Gourry commissioned to rid a village of a rampaging werewolf. Of course, it isn't long before Lina is blowing things up with her over-the-top sorcery, whether it be a genuine threat to her person or an unkind comment on her lack of cleavage. Gourry is a warrior but seems to only be around for ornamental purposes, and runs the oft-milked 'time of the month' gag into the ground.

Despite the wafer-thin plot, nobody seems to know what's supposed to be going on, with the characters tripping each other up for no apparent reason other than to make the reader laugh, I suppose. Admittedly, the anime series is unchallenging fare, but it almost looks like a work of genius compared to this. The artwork isn't anything to get excited about either, with non-existent backgrounds and the so-called humorous scenes becoming an excuse to dash off poorly drawn caricatures. A real disappointment. ●



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MISCELLANEOUS

13 Secrets for Speaking Fluent Japanese

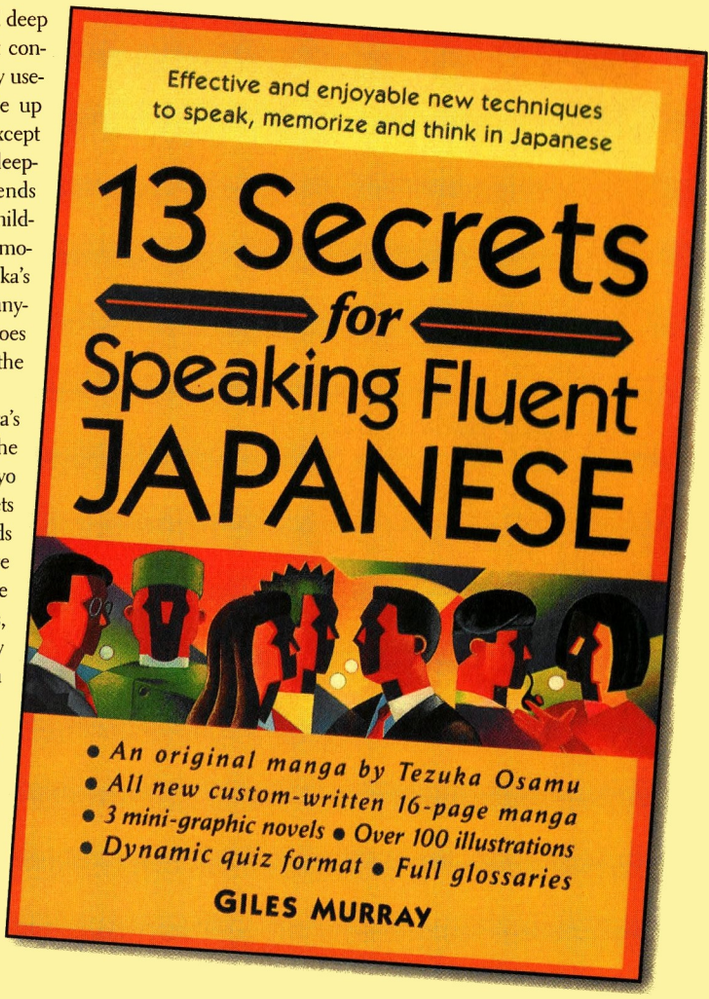
Format: Book
Publisher: Kodansha International
Author: Giles Murray
Price: $17.00/£10.99
ISBN: 4-7700-2302-2
Reviewer: Jonathan Clements
Rating: ★★★

Two immediate high-fives for Murray's chirpy little book – firstly he makes the invaluable point that a linguist should look for learning opportunites anywhere and everywhere, from bus tickets to bog rolls. Secondly, he's not afraid to approach language-learning from a child's point of view, and some of the best parts of his book are cribbed from Japanese elementary schools.

Of course, there's no such thing as 13 sure-fire steps to fluency, and this book will have a hit-and-miss effect from reader to reader. There are a few mnemonics that'll stick to whoever they're thrown at, but the most impressive chapter for me was a collection of juvenile jokes that revolved around horrendous puns – each and every one has lodged deep in my brain, along with the vocabulary it contains. Other bits are fun, but not necessarily useful. The short chapter on chatting people up isn't really going to help your Japanese, except perhaps indirectly by fixing you up with a 'sleeping dictionary'. A chapter which sends Commodore Perry through a time warp is mildly amusing, but doesn't really work as a memory aid. And the extract from Osamu Tezuka's *Blackjack* won't tell *Manga Max* readers anything they don't know already, even if it does make the vital point that comics are one of the best langauge-learning tools ever.

Particularly fun was Tadashi Nomura's laugh-riot mini-manga *If....*, which told the all-too-familiar story of a foreigner in Tokyo who pulls a local girl, falls in love, gets pounced on by a language-vampire and ends up totally fugu-ed up at a restaurant. More importantly, the English translations are carefully inserted in between the panels, making the Japanese much easier to follow than if placed on another page à la *Mangajin*.

Like Kodansha's innovative *Sing Japanese* before it, this is an original entry in the teaching stakes, liable to reward serious students who don't mind trying something new. Don't buy this book expecting to become fluent, but it may well inspire you to approach language-learning from a couple of different and rewarding angles. ●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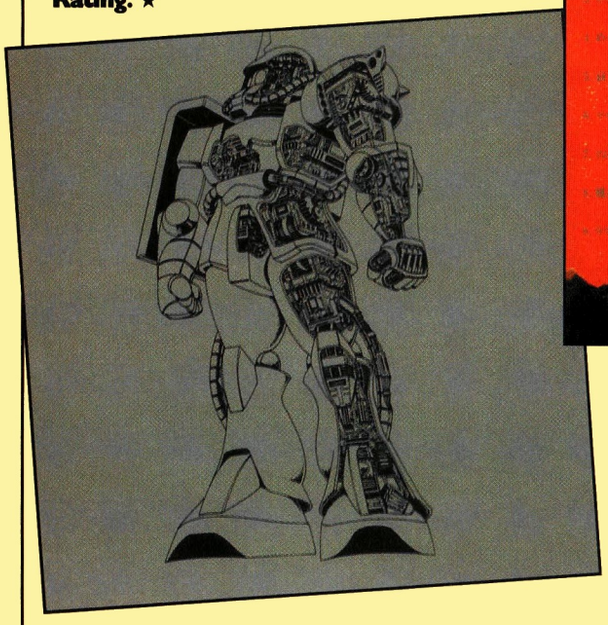
GILES MURRAY

Reverberation in Gundam

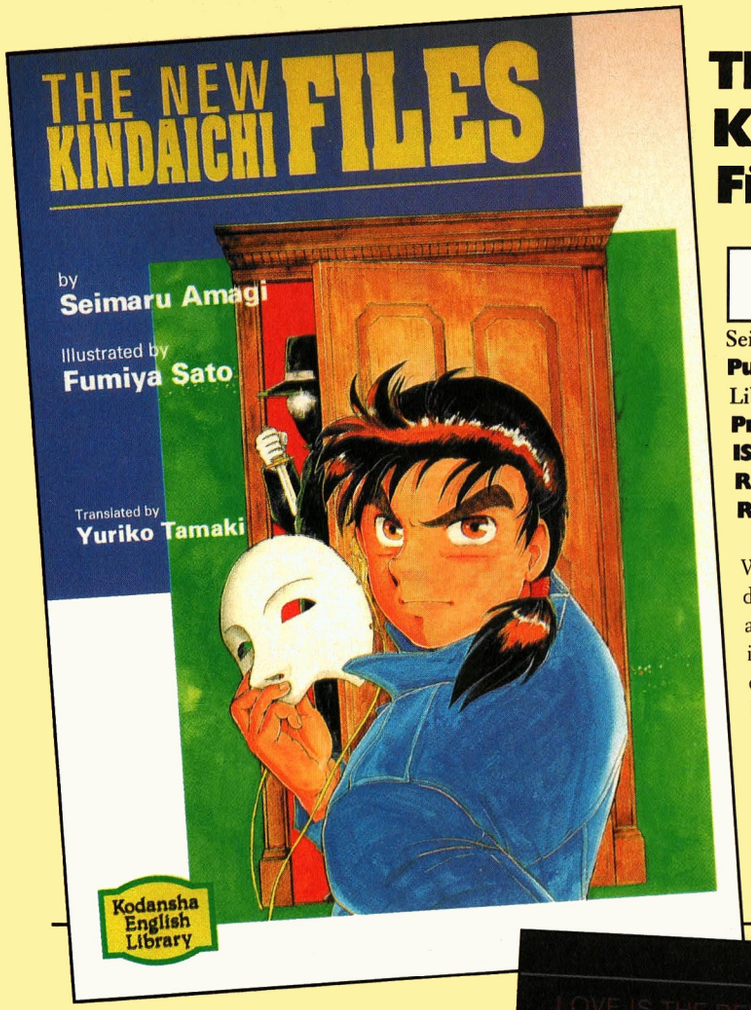
Format: CD
Artist: Daisaku Inoue & 'Tong Hoo'
Serial: TECD-55439
Price: c.£40
Publisher: Teichiku
Reviewer: Cathy Sterling
Rating: ★



This may be the most ill-judged marketing gimmick I have ever seen. Stuffed into a giant box the size of a laser disc, this 38-minute CD has got a glittery finish *(ooh)* and is a limited edition *(aah)* – though according to my copy, your 'collector's item' will be owned by 34,000 others. There's also a rather nice booklet about the second *Gundam* movie, featuring synopses, character details and info on the voice actors. I'd be more impressed, but the Yoshikazu Yasuhiko centrefold had already detached itself from the inadequate staples.

Nestling amid all the padding is the CD itself, a paltry nine tracks of execrable prog rock, supposedly as a celebration of the kind of music that was popular 20 years ago when *Gundam* first kicked off. A belated effort to do *War of the Worlds*, perhaps, but with *Gundam* characters, pared down into little more than a collection of image songs about particular characters?

Partly recorded in LA, I only wish there was a video, since the sight of several white session musicians trying not to snicker at the Japlish lyrics might have made this worthwhile. As it is, this sounds like Toto on a bad day, and might have got away with it but for the obscenely overblown packaging, which doubtless increased the price (and further reduced my rating from a blandly forgiveable two stars). ●



The New Kindaichi Files

Format: Book, 220pp
Author: Seimaru Amagi
Publisher: Kodansha English Library
Price: £7.99
ISBN: 4 7700 2288 3
Reviewer: Peter J Evans
Rating: ★★

When two people were murdered at a remote hotel theatre, it was boy detective Hajime Kindaichi who solved the case. Years later the resort has been rebuilt, and new owner Kazumo Kurosawa invites Kindaichi back to see his production of *The Phantom of The Opera* taking shape. Given Kurosawa's obsession with that particular story it comes as no surprise when actors start getting bumped off all over again, in a manner that suggests somebody is intent on recreating the Phantom's crimes in the bloodiest way possible. Before long, Kindaichi finds himself investigating a spiralling sequence of locked-room mysteries, false leads and brutal killings.

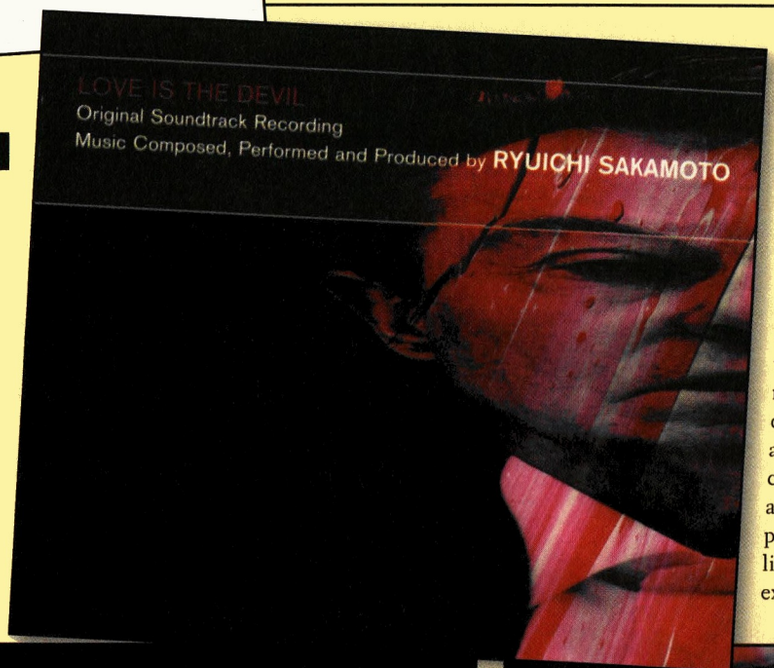
Nicely produced by Kodansha and illustrated by Fumiya Sato (who draws the *Kindaichi* manga in Japan), this is a small novel that should take the average reader no more than half an hour to skim through. However, it is also ferociously dull. All the characters speak in exactly the same way, description is flaccid, and atmosphere – essential in a murder mystery such as this – is totally absent. In fact, the book reads like a novel for children. Only the sexual content and occasionally ugly death scenes make it seem it otherwise.

Luckily the story redeems itself in the final chapter, when the murderer's motives are finally revealed – the identity of the killer is no surprise at all, but the reason why the victims died is far more complex, and more human, than previous chapters might lead one to believe.

As the translation notes at the back of the book show, this is far more a reading exercise for Japanese students than a novel for an English-speaking audience. Completely re-written it might have been interesting. Simply translated, it is little more than a curiosity. ●

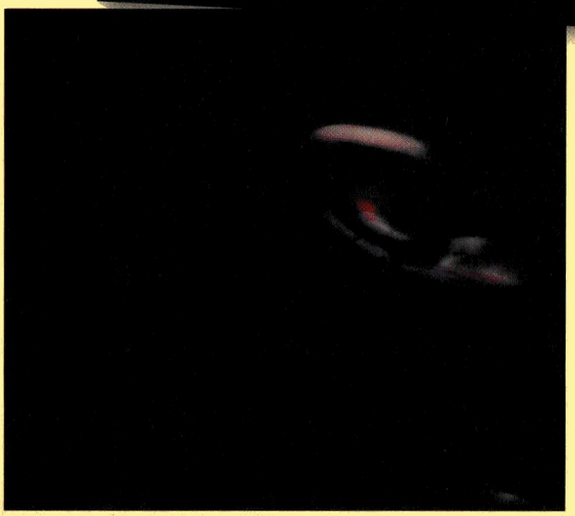
Love is the Devil OST

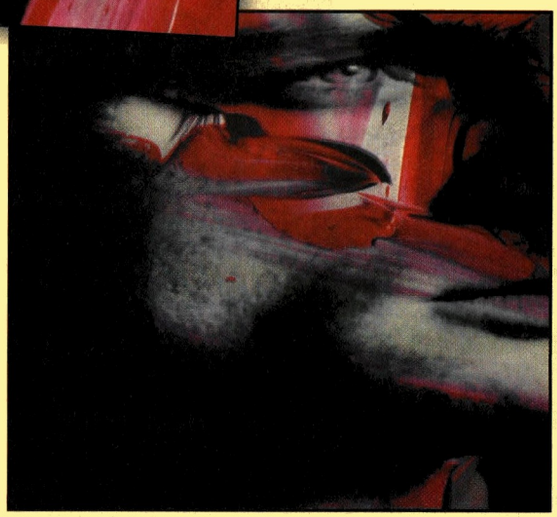
Format: CD
Artist: Ryuichi Sakamoto
Serial: ASPH-0987
Publisher: Asphodel
Price: $15.98
Reviewer: Jeremy Clarke
Rating: ★★★



Sakamoto is notorious for interspersing his accessible pop albums with more difficult and obtuse experimental music. Here he seems to be doing the same with his soundtracks – if his work for *Snake Eyes* (Reviews – MM1) effortlessly fits the bill as a broodily romantic score for a suspense thriller, director John Maybury's movie *Love is the Devil* eschews any such Hollywood blockbuster template, shooting a drama about Brit painter Francis Bacon as a sort of avant-garde visual equivalent to the great man's paintings. Consequently, the challenge to the composer of doing justice to such images is daunting.

If Sakamoto's solution isn't exactly easy listening, it's undeniably fascinating and slowly grows on you. Unadorned, repetitive, gloomy eight note piano riffs are sometimes overlaid with buzzing fly-like sounds, eerie sirens appear to sing on synthesised winds, piano doodlings overlay dreamlike cycling synthesiser loops. There follow more unsettling four and eight note piano riffs, something evocative of aliens breathing inside the world of a cathode ray tube, something else of hovering flying saucers with insects who come on and munch in the foreground, a cross between heavy breathing as if recorded underwater and cooing pigeons, more insects and a closing track which puffs, pants and races along like an impatient, synthesiser express train. ●





Letters

We regret that we cannot reply personally to any correspondence or return any unsolicited items sent to the magazine.

OU EST L'ANIME?

I'm bothered about the cost of being an anime fan in the UK. This was touched on in MM3 when the cost of collecting the entire *Evangelion* saga was put at around £170. These prices are quite simply ridiculous. Sure these are small companies in a small market but alarm bells must start ringing. "Rip-off" comes to mind. Even the 50-60 minutes of *Evangelion* is steep at 14 quid.

I don't know the costs of buying rights, but there are many other companies in the foreign film market releasing new blockbuster films at the same cost as 30 minutes of anime. Their market isn't any bigger than anime's, with many of their titles selling only 1000-1500 units.

The difference is that many anime releases are serials and so require the buyer to make a significant investment, both of cash and of time. More often than not, having bought a number of videos in a series you find it peters out without a proper ending.

I think that this is one of the reasons Joe Public stopped buying, along with duff titles. He bought a video only to find he had to buy another 5-10 to see the ending. Anime for the casual buyer is too big an investment, which on many occasions isn't warranted in terms of story or quality.

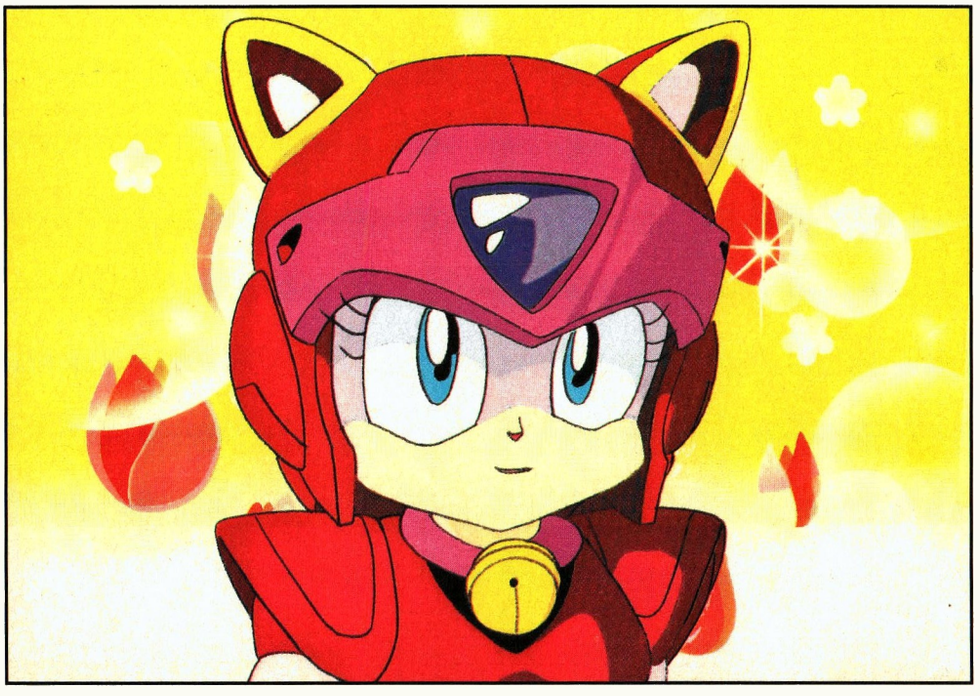
I know such serials are the mainstay of anime – I've bought many and as a student I have had to struggle to do so – but *Evangelion* proved too much for me. Even collecting the *Dirty Pair* or *Gunsmith Cats* was expensive. Surely anime companies could release more one-shot tapes or at least provide decent box-sets which reward us for buying the complete set.

I bought the entire series of *The Mysterious Cities of Gold* in France for 490 francs. That's about £52 for 16 hours of viewing, seven tapes, 40 episodes. The same amount of anime in the UK would be two episodes to a tape and cost £14 each, resulting in 14 x 20 = £280 for the series. That's if it reached the end here. This is out of my price range. Yet in France I can get a copy of *Samurai Pizza Cats*, *Sailor Moon* or two *Dragon Ball Z* tapes for just four quid. I even got hold of *Dr Slump* and the *Dirty Pair* television series amongst others for £3 a tape.

Until companies address this problem those who simply don't have the means, such as students now with negative incomes or those for whom anime is a mild interest, will increasingly stay away.

By the way, I was watching an old tape of *Eurotrash* and some bloke called Jonathan Clements popped up blabbing on about how superdooper Ultraman's tights were. Guilty?

Iain McEwan, Arbroath, Scotland



Of watching *Eurotrash*? You certainly are, you sick puppy. But yes, that was a much younger, thinner, richer me spouting forth on the joys of Japanese superheroes. On the anime front, you're still paying less for anime tapes than the Japanese (who are the ones who decide how much to charge for rights). I had to buy a copy of *Cowboy Be-Bop* last month which cost ¥6800. That's just two episodes for £35. If anime companies charged Japanese prices, you'd have to pay three times as much as you do now.

Many companies in the US (some of whom set UK prices) primarily distribute to the rental market, where the high cost of a tape is off-set by the low cost of viewing it. As I pointed out in the *Evangelion* article, much of the problem stems from the attempt to stuff television product into an unsuitable distribution medium. Anime costs nothing on television, and a pittance on rental or pay-per-view.

We love getting your letters, and read them all, even if there isn't enough room to put them all in the magazine. Send your letters to Manga Max, Titan Magazines, 42-44 Dolben Street, London SE1 0UP, UK or titanbooks@compuserve.com. Full addresses will not be printed unless correspondents specifically request it. We reserve the right to edit letters for space, consistency and editorial caprice.

POP QUIZ

In MM4 you only reviewed one UK anime video but 11 US anime videos. Why is this? Is it because there are less anime released in the UK?
Darren Wright, Wednesfield, Wolverhampton

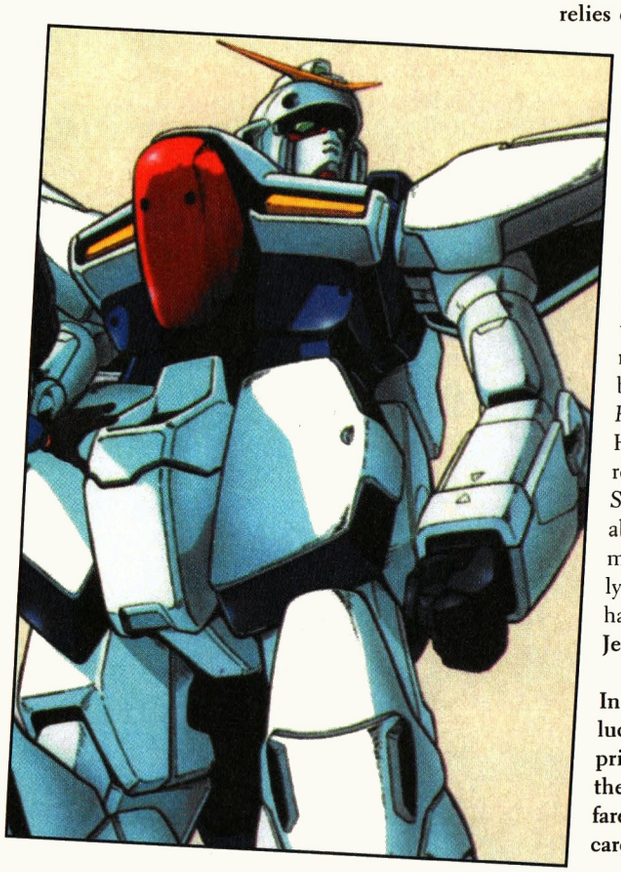
Yes.

STARTING GUNDAM

The omnipresent Jim Swallow is absolutely correct (Reviews, MM4) that new viewers should not start with AnimeVillage.com's releases of the original *Gundam* movies. The combination of "old" animation and an over riding Seventies feel would definitely put new viewers off. The problem with this is that the entire UC *Gundam* timeline hinges on the three movies. This makes it very difficult for someone with no experience of *Gundam* to actually "start" the saga so to speak.

Both *Gundam 0083: Stardust Memories* and *Gundam 0080: War in the Pocket* are set after the original *Gundam* and rely on it for extensive background. Whilst the animation may be better the continuity will confuse most un-initiated viewers.

The best series to start would be something like *08th MS Team*, which happens at the beginning of the continuity but with the added bonus of being well animated and easy to get into. Unfortunately it isn't commercially available in the West at the moment. So where would a new viewer start?
Oliver Barder, via e-mail.



It is one of the most taxing problems in anime distribution: what do you do when a new show relies on the backstory provided by an old one, which, while not necessarily *bad*, might be showing its age a bit? Witness the confusing release of fragments of *Gall Force* in the UK, the bizarre behaviour of characters in *Megazone 23*, and, of course, the furrowed mainstream brows that greeted *Macross Plus*.

THE REAL PERFECT BLUE?

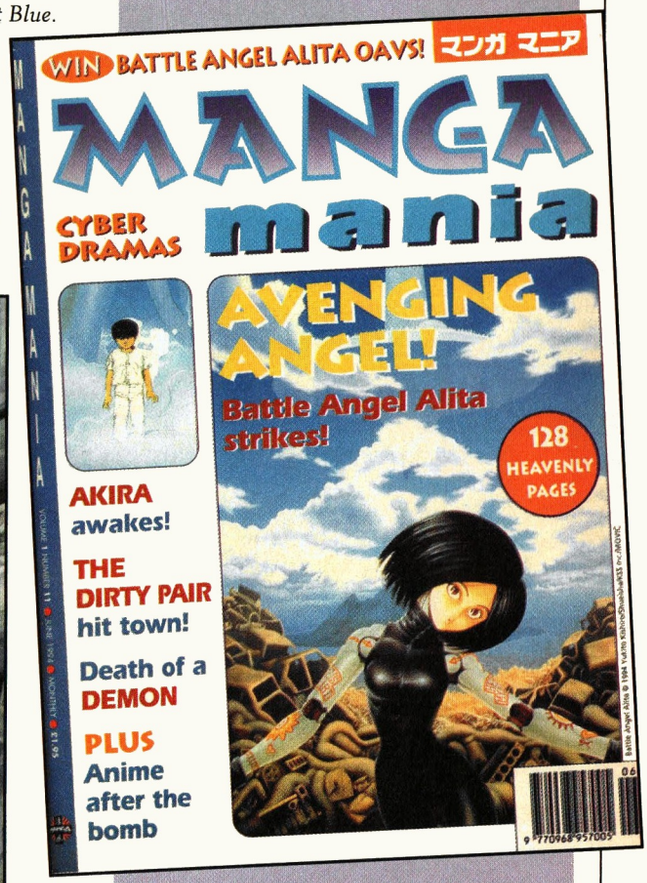
I'd just like to clarify, before someone else takes exception, that while I did indeed make comparisons as printed in MM4 between misguided use of flashback in *Perfect Blue*, *Courage Under Fire* and Hitchcock's *Stage Fright*, the part which reads, "and the same could be argued for *Saving Private Ryan*" and the observation about Spielberg's film that follows, is neither mine nor a comment with which I necessarily agree. *SPR* is not a film I personally would have brought up in relation to *Perfect Blue*.
Jeremy Clarke, London.

In fact, all of MM4 was simply a hallucination, and your piece was never printed. When it wasn't printed, there weren't any mistakes. So farewell, and good luck in your new career as an idol singer.

LOOK back in MANGA

Five years ago in June 1994, reports of *Manga Mania*'s demise were greatly exaggerated, when it reappeared on the news-stands after a one-month hiatus. On the surface it was business as usual — but although there would not be an official announcement for several months, the magazine was now owned by Manga Entertainment.

***New Century Cyber Formula GPX* was out in Japan, and *Battle Angel Alita* was out in the UK. US releases included *Ranma: Big Trouble in Nekonron*, *Bubblegum Crash* and the live-action *Guyver* movie. Quote of the month is from Cefn Ridout's editorial: "One of two things is likely to happen if this situation continues apace. One, the anime market will be rapidly saturated with product of varying quality and scope and, after a lengthy skirmish, only the fittest will survive. Or two, the intense competition will actually force the market to grow..."**



LAST WORD

Iain Lowson has a cautionary tale.

You got the look

There follows a Public Service Announcement for those aiming to introduce their loved ones to the delights of Japanese animation.

Due care and attention should be taken when choosing the anime titles to which the initiate will be subjected. Here's why: *Overfiend* killed my wife.

No, really.

Back when my wife and I were students in the first hormonal throes of love, *Akira* exploded onto arthouse cinema screens across the country. Everything was OK then.

We were swept along with many of our wastrel kin (missing classes in the early afternoon) to see this phenomenon. In the half light of the cinema, we rubbed shoulders with arty schmucks (goatee beards and port-stained lips), actual Japanese people (complete with wry, *I-told-you-so* smiles), and sweaty Heavy Metal fans (many of whom sported the same smiles as their Japanese friends). Dim lights faded yet further. Encroaching darkness was pierced with the stab of brilliant neon colours. Our minds were expanded.

They were not, it has to be said, expanded to a point where by we could even hazard a guess at the meaning of the ending.

Fast forward by a year or more.

The local video shop near my dearly beloved's flat in Edinburgh has – shock-horror – anime on the shelves! Shall we give it a go? We enjoyed that there *Akira* thing. We enjoy all sorts of films; both the good and the very, very bad. For once Rutger Hauer is left behind, glaring moodily down from the shelf. We grab an anime, the one that looks a little like a horror film. We like those.

Fast forward through two hours of pulsating mega-penis action.

Ooops…

The Light Of My Life's flatmates have both made mumbled excuses during the 'event' and left. One of them went so far as to leave the building. As the film <ahem> came to an end, my better half and I sat stunned. We even watched the copyright bit at the end, unable to move.

"That was…", I began, my voice failing me.

"Yes. It was. Wasn't it", my beloved said.

I glanced around to see her give The Look.

Since the day the *Overfiend* killed any interest my dear lady had in Japanese animation, I have been condemned to guiltily watch begged, borrowed and bought anime videos in the afternoons, or when my wife's duties keep her up late.

I've been 'caught' a couple of times. This really hasn't helped. Once was during my baffled viewing of an episode of *Urusei Yatsura*. That was bad, but it was nothing compared to her immaculately timed entrance during *that* scene in *Plastic Little*.

The Look I got then was definitely neither plastic nor little.

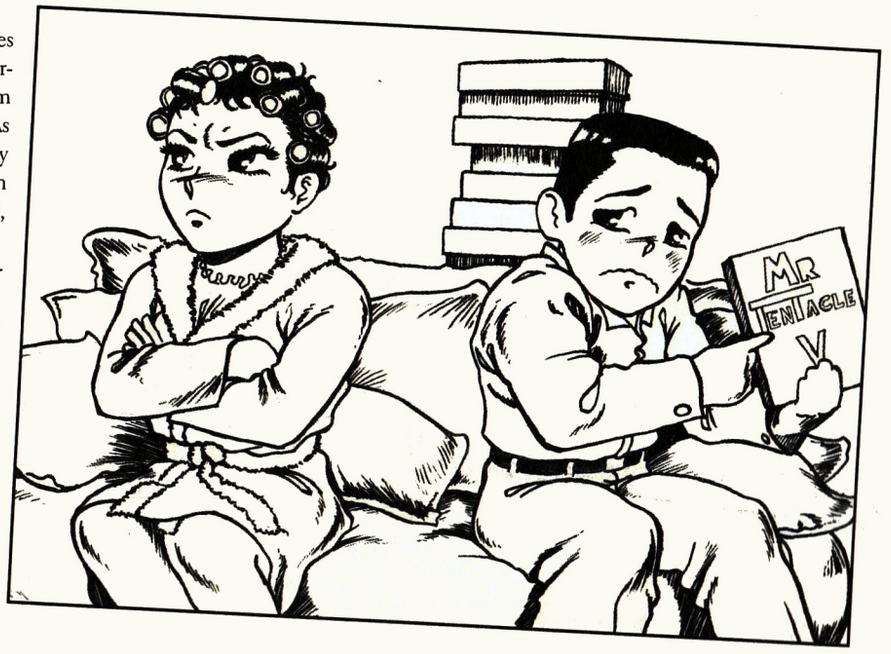
I've bided my time since, playing a deadly game of cat-and-mouse with The Look. I've raved about videos and series that have been tactically returned before she can see them. I've had strategic conversations within earshot with like-minded friends. I've even converted a few of our mutual pals to the growing army of manga/anime fans.

There have been a few battles won in this 'war'. *Ultimate Teacher*'s Velvet Pussy Panties™ went down well. Milady got most of the gags in *Project A-Ko*. I shot myself in the foot with *Bubblegum Crisis*, I must confess. Arriving home with all eight episodes in my arms and a puppy-dog hopeful smile on my face didn't even make a dent in the armoured skin of The Look.

Perhaps the fact that I'd been proudly and loudly playing the *BGC* soundtrack, complete with its *Eurotrash*-worthy, sub-Europe (think 'Final Countdown') pop tracks, had given my nemesis all the ammunition she needed.

D-Day is coming. My campaign hits the beaches (and the Cameo Cinema, Edinburgh) in May. I'll be hoping then that the dark spectre of *Overfiend* can be wiped from the sky, leaving the heavens a *Perfect Blue*. ●

Ian Lowson is a writer whose work has appeared in *Star Wars* & *Babylon 5* magazines, amongst others.



Picture by & © Andy Hepworth

NEXT Issue

Coming in MANGA MAX Issue 8

As **Princess Mononoke** hits the US, we preview Miyazaki's masterpiece. With a **Kim Ki-Young** season at the London Pan-Asian Film Festival, we investigate his place in Korean cinema. We check out the **City Hunter** manga and the spooky world of anime ghost stories, plus a peek into the far stranger world of anime video box numbering and as a bonus, we ask how '**Manga**' is *The Matrix*?

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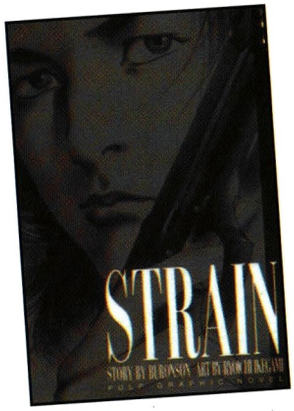

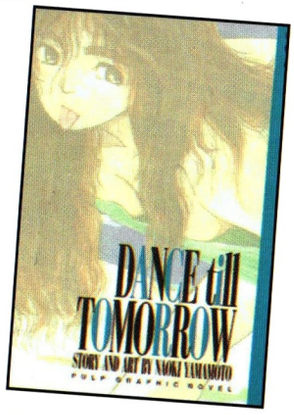

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